

A CHARACTER BOOK FOR DEMON: THE FALLEN™

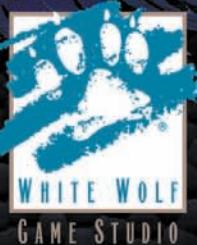
DAMNED & DECEIVED

A Whisper in the Darkness

They seek the ambitious, vengeful, crippled and bereft. Men and women who feel cheated by the world, deprived of the lives they deserve. With a knowing look and honeyed words, the fallen plumb the depths of these mortal souls, fulfilling the deepest desires. The angels of the Abyss can make mortals' wildest dreams come true. But at what cost?

A Deal with the Damned

Demon: Damned and Deceived is an in-depth look at the seductive and often destructive relationships between the fallen and their mortal thralls. Who do the fallen seek as potential partners in a Faustian bond? What gifts do they offer, and why? Can a mortal make a deal with the Devil and survive, or is every thrall destined for madness and death?



DEMONED 18 DECEIVED

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EDITOR'S NOTE

As the fill-in developer of **Demon: Fear to Tread** some months ago, I made a little error on the credit's page—ironically on the Editor credit. The book's actual editor was John Chambers, rather than Michelle Lyons. Sorry for the mix-up, guys. Entirely my fault.



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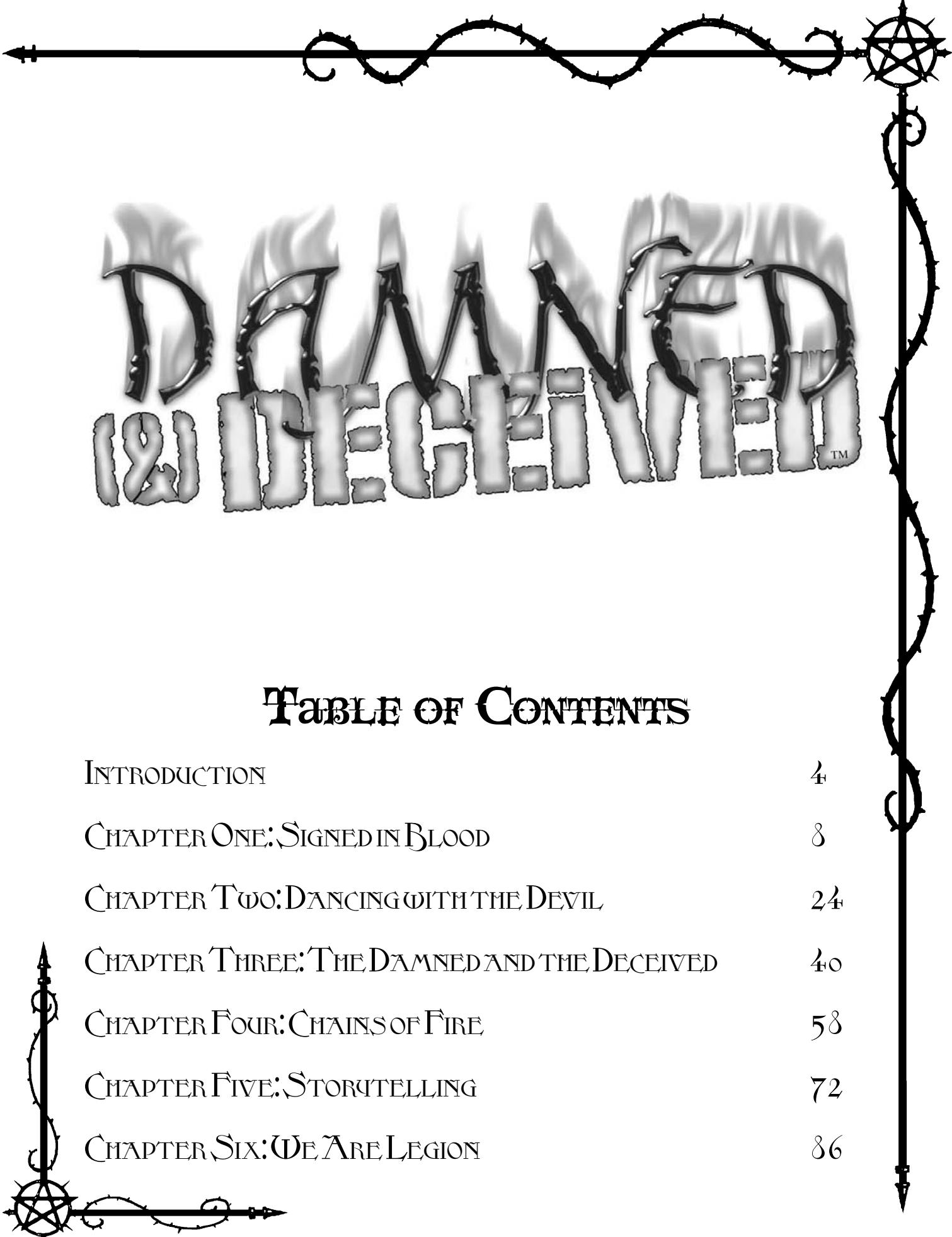
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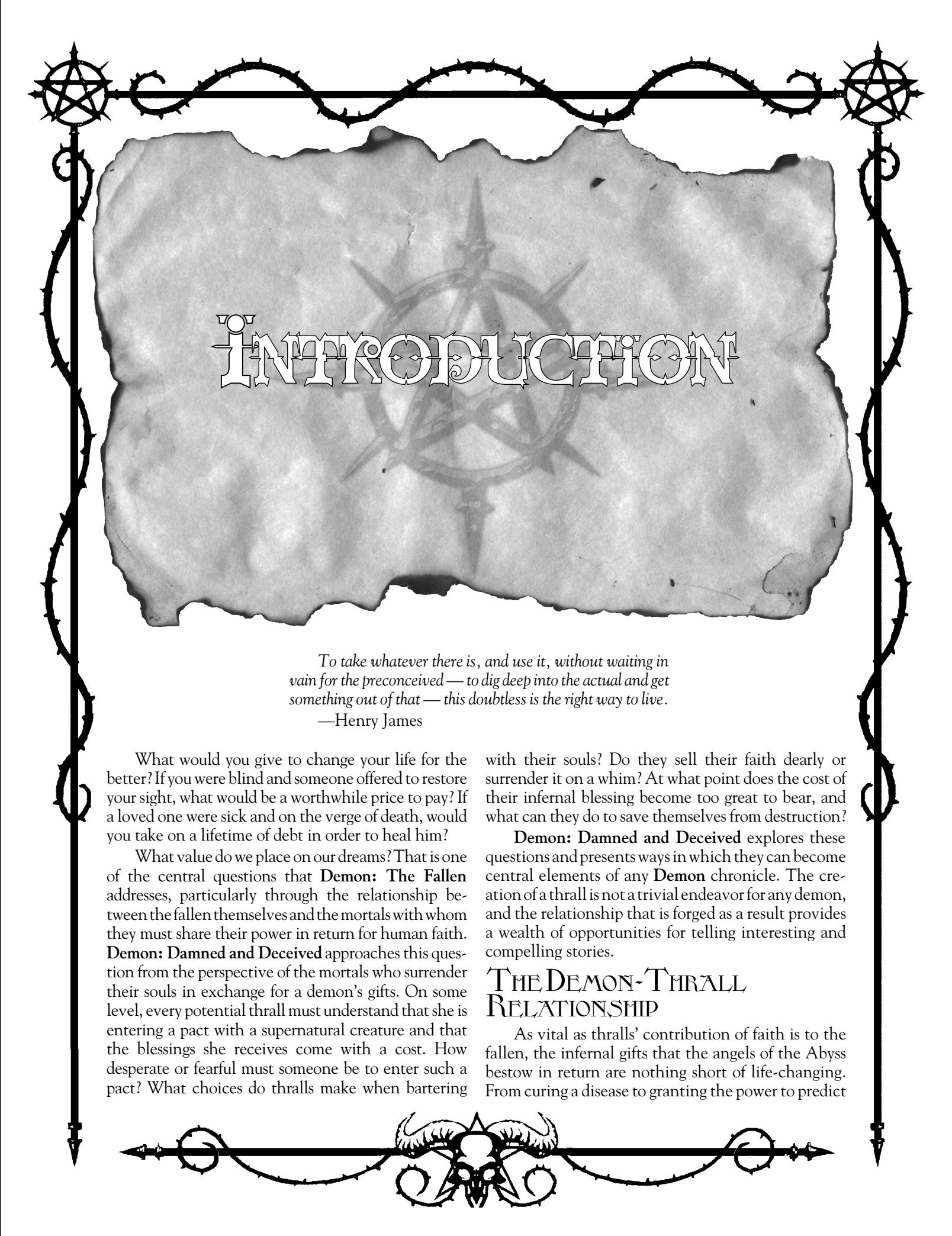
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C Wilkins



INTRODUCTION

To take whatever there is, and use it, without waiting in vain for the preconceived — to dig deep into the actual and get something out of that — this doubtless is the right way to live.

—Henry James

What would you give to change your life for the better? If you were blind and someone offered to restore your sight, what would be a worthwhile price to pay? If a loved one were sick and on the verge of death, would you take on a lifetime of debt in order to heal him?

What value do we place on our dreams? That is one of the central questions that **Demon: The Fallen** addresses, particularly through the relationship between the fallen themselves and the mortals with whom they must share their power in return for human faith. **Demon: Damned and Deceived** approaches this question from the perspective of the mortals who surrender their souls in exchange for a demon's gifts. On some level, every potential thrall must understand that she is entering a pact with a supernatural creature and that the blessings she receives come with a cost. How desperate or fearful must someone be to enter such a pact? What choices do thralls make when bartering

with their souls? Do they sell their faith dearly or surrender it on a whim? At what point does the cost of their infernal blessing become too great to bear, and what can they do to save themselves from destruction?

Demon: Damned and Deceived explores these questions and presents ways in which they can become central elements of any **Demon** chronicle. The creation of a thrall is not a trivial endeavor for any demon, and the relationship that is forged as a result provides a wealth of opportunities for telling interesting and compelling stories.

THE DEMON-THRALL RELATIONSHIP

As vital as thralls' contribution of faith is to the fallen, the infernal gifts that the angels of the Abyss bestow in return are nothing short of life-changing. From curing a disease to granting the power to predict

the future, the effects of a Faustian bargain profoundly affect the way a thrall conducts her life. Will she use her newfound health or prosperity to live responsibly, or will she be tempted to take advantage of her gifts at the expense of others? Will she grow wealthy, revenge herself on those who wronged her or seize the reins of power and change the world to her liking? Can she cope with the new challenges and problems that these infernal gifts bring, or will the unintended consequences of her actions only bring her more misery and pain?

In many ways, the fate of a demon's thrall depends largely on the demon herself. Not all fallen maintain contact with their sources of Faith once the Faustian pact has been sealed, but those who do are in a position to use their relationship to influence the actions that a thrall takes. Such is particularly true of Reconcilers, Luciferans and the eponymous Faustians, who frequently use their thralls as allies or agents of influence, but the same can even be said for the nihilistic Ravengers. The reasons are as much practical as ideological. Creating a Faustian pact is a time-consuming process, and as such, thralls are resources to be protected. Demons who allow their thralls to corrupt and destroy themselves risk being caught short when confronted by their own misfortunes.

Though many fallen are loath to admit it, they *need* humanity, perhaps more than humanity needs them. The angels of the Abyss need human faith to survive, and the relationship this need creates places as many demands on the demons as it does on their thralls. The fallen need their thralls for the Faith they provide, for the knowledge and insight into human society they possess, and often for the perspective they provide in contrast to the mindless hate of the demon's Torment. These human gifts come with a price of their own, measured in time, energy and sacrifice. How much is a demon willing to give in order to keep her thralls safe? How much is she willing to suffer in order to protect them from her enemies? How much time and energy is she willing to devote to keeping her thralls from sowing the seeds of their own destruction? This relationship is one that neither party should enter casually.

THEME

The two overriding themes of **Demon: Damned and Deceived** are temptation and corruption. Temptation is the heart of the Faustian pact. Can the demon offer health, power or riches sufficient to convince the mortal to part with his soul? At what point does a person become willing to pay such a terrible price to essentially admit that he can't live

the life he wants without supernatural assistance? And once he gains the power to win hearts or predict lottery numbers, can he resist the temptation to abuse that power to fuel his basest impulses?

These questions bring us to the theme of corruption. The gifts of the fallen are subversive, undercutting a person's integrity and convictions by giving him an easy solution to his problems or handing him the means to achieve his heart's desire. As the temptation to use and abuse his powers increases, so too does those powers' corruptive influence on his soul, leading him to commit increasingly immoral or unethical acts. Even if a thrall manages to rise above temptation and use his gifts responsibly, the matter of the demon's corruption arises as well. The fallen wage a constant struggle against their darker nature, and those who succumb to their Torment often drag their thralls down with them, forcing the mortals to perform terrible acts in their service.

MOOD

The mood of **Demon: Damned and Deceived** runs the gamut from despair and hopelessness to joy, wonder and ultimately terror and madness. Most thralls are chosen because they are at low ebbs in their lives. Crippled, frustrated or insecure, they believe that they have no hope to live the life they believe they deserve. The gifts of the fallen change all that. Their awe and wonder at encountering one of the angels of the Abyss gives way to the joys that their new power brings. For a time, their lives are everything they dreamed possible and more, but the price becomes apparent before long. As the thralls begin to realize that they are now bound to a creature that is every bit the monster that legend suggests, their initial euphoria gives way to apprehension and fear.

OPTIONAL RULES FOR THRALLS

Demon: Damned and Deceived contains optional and expanded systems for creating thrall characters and providing them with infernal gifts. You're encouraged to add them to your **Demon** chronicle if you want, but if you prefer the more streamlined system presented in Chapter Nine of the **Demon** core rules, that's fine too. If you want to incorporate these expanded systems into your game, make sure that the rest of your troupe agrees so that no one is left out and everyone has fun.

Consider this book a collection of new opportunities to expand the horizons of your chronicle, but as ever, our Golden Rule applies: Take what works for your troupe and discard the rest.

When the fallen force their will upon their thralls or ravage them for Faith, the true dangers of the relationship are revealed. From that point on, the thralls must struggle to maintain their sanity against a rising tide of madness and corruption. It is a struggle that few (if any) thralls will win.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Demon: Damned and Deceived is organized into the following chapters, each exploring a different facet of the thralls' condition and their relationship to the fallen. Remember, though, that the most important "chapter" in a storytelling game is your imagination. Never let anything in this book be a substitute for your own creativity.

The first three chapters of **Demon: Damned and Deceived** tell the stories of three mortals who become thralls, and they explore the challenges that those mortals face and the price they ultimately pay for their gifts. The chapters illustrate the demon-thrall relationship from the perspective of the thralls, and they provide inspiration for portraying this relationship in your own stories and chronicles.

Chapter One: Signed in Blood explores how demons seek out mortals suitable for Faustian pacts and uncover their wants and needs, as well as a number of ways that the fallen lure these humans into selling their souls.

Chapter Two: Dancing with the Devil concerns itself with how thralls come to grips with their newfound gifts, different ways that the fallen make use of their newfound thralls and the price that many must pay for making a pact with a demon.

Chapter Three: The Damned and the Deceived is about the ultimate fate that awaits many thralls — a plunge into madness brought on by their own temptations or the depredation of their infernal masters.

Chapter Four: Chains of Fire provides an expanded system of character creation for thralls that players and Storytellers can use, as well as guidelines for creating infernal gifts. A list of sample gifts is provided as a starting point to spark your own creativity.

Chapter Five: Storytelling presents valuable tips and advice for portraying thralls in **Demon** stories and chronicles. It also provides guidelines for including thralls as major characters or even running an all-thrall chronicle.

Chapter Six: We Are Legion presents seven thrall character templates that can be used for Storyteller

characters in a chronicle or to provide inspiration for players who want to create their own thrall characters.

SOURCE MATERIAL

Folklore and legend is rife with cautionary tales about mortals who sell their souls to the Devil in exchange for their hearts' desire, only to suffer untold tragedy as a result. Many of these hapless mortals think they can cheat the Devil at his own game, gaining everything they want and tricking Old Scratch out of his prize. Sometimes they even succeed.

What follows is a list of books and movies that can provide inspiration and insight into this tangled relationship between demon and man. Some of these sources were previously mentioned in the **Demon** core rules, but they could stand to be revisited for the perspectives they offer on the human side of the demon-thrall relationship.

Recommended books include:

Doctor Faustus, by Christopher Marlowe. The play that coined the term "Faustian bargain," this tale of a man who sells his soul to Mephistopheles in exchange for wisdom is the classical example of an infernal pact.

Needful Things, by Steven King. This novel, about a demon who comes to Castle Rock, Maine and entrails everyone who comes into his store, is an excellent source of inspiration for the methods that a fallen can use to insinuate himself into a community and uncover the deepest desires of its inhabitants.

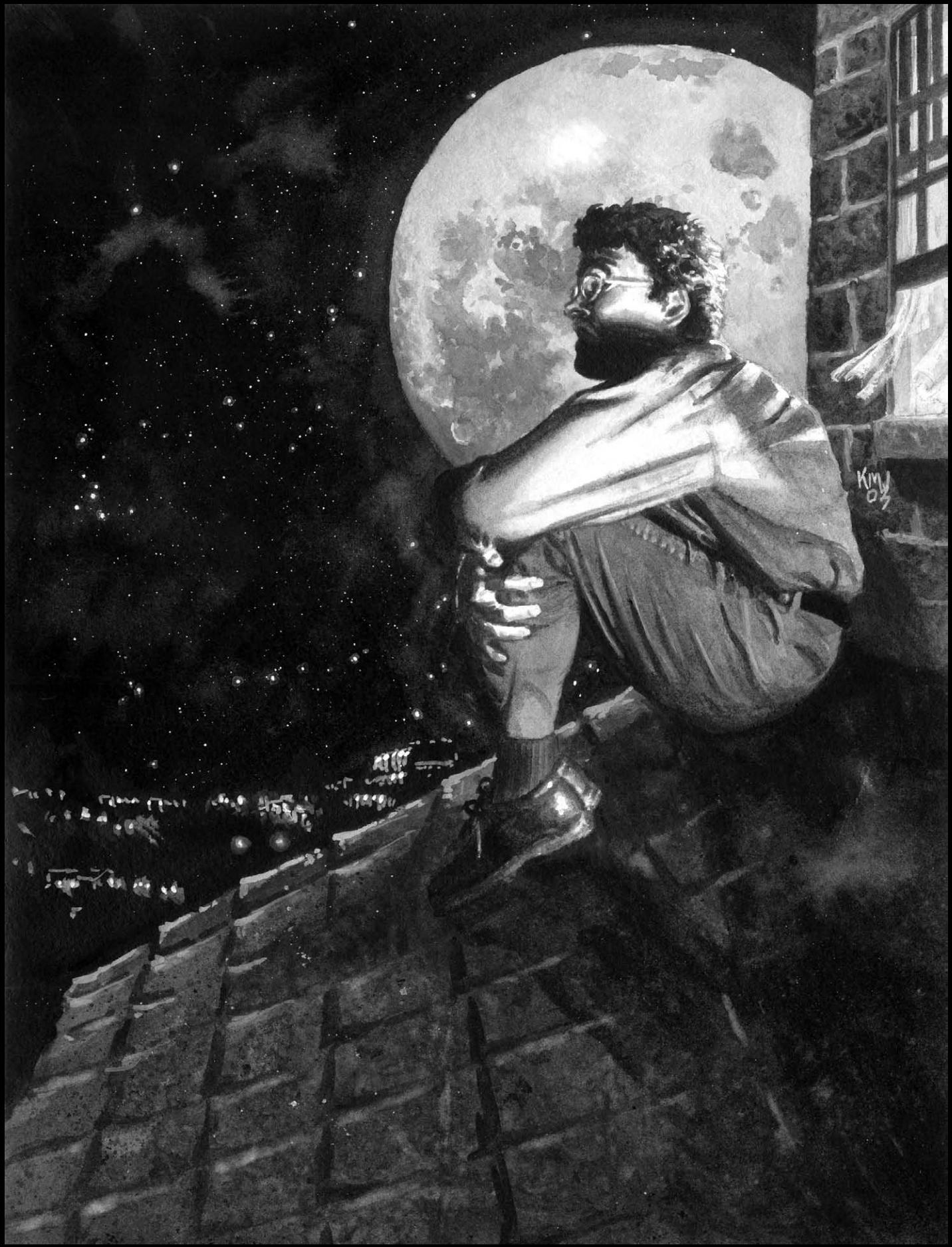
The Screwtape Letters, by C. S. Lewis. Presented as a collection of letters written by one demon to another, the book is an insightful commentary on temptation and faith in the divine.

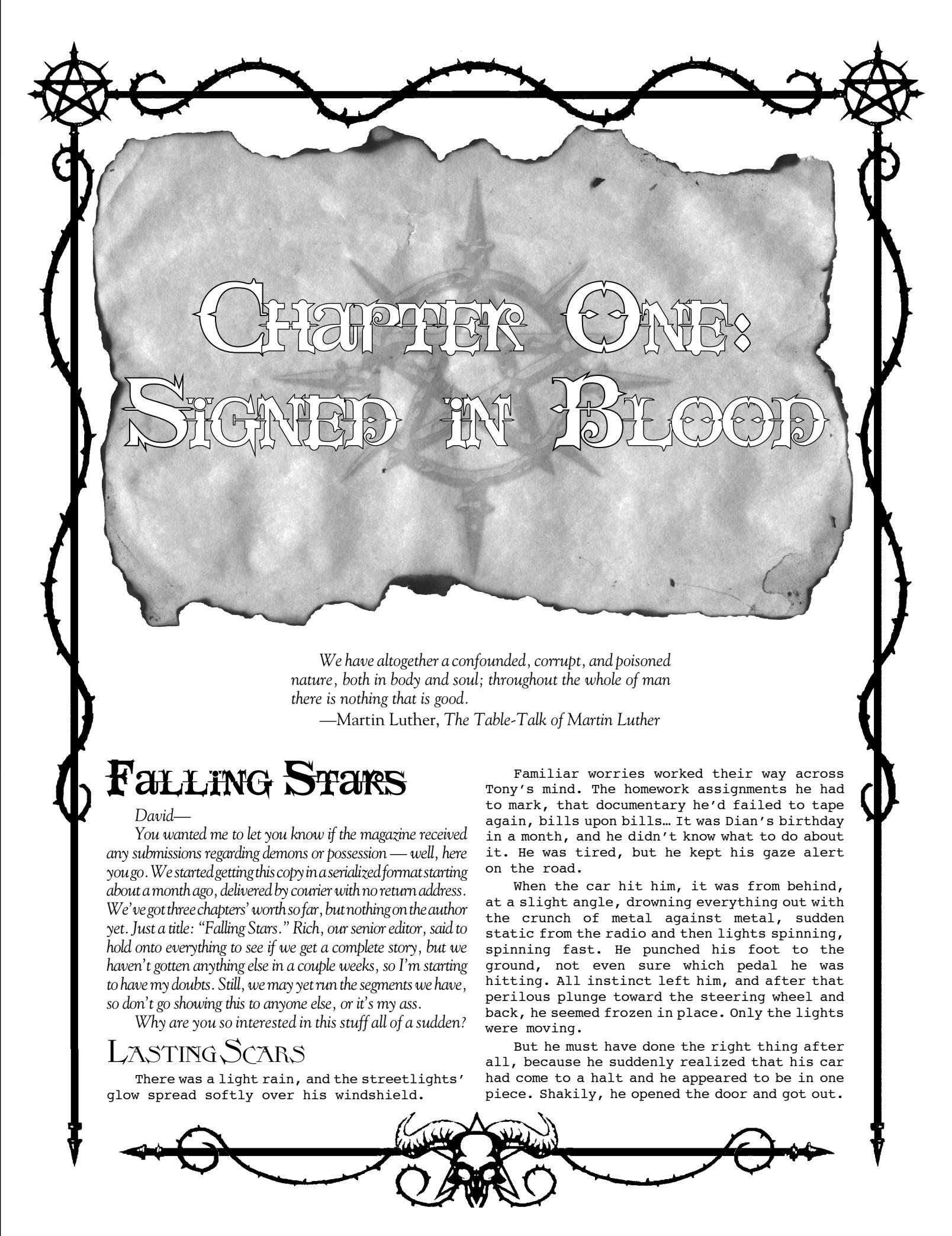
Movie and TV sources include:

The Devil's Advocate. This movie, about a lawyer tempted by the Devil himself, is an excellent example of how a demon can try to tempt a mortal into a Faustian pact.

The Devil and Daniel Webster. This movie based on the Stephen Vincent Benet short story, about a farmer who sells his soul to Satan for seven years of success, is another excellent example of the temptation that leads mortals into Faustian pacts — and the lengths they will go to in order to reclaim their soul.

American Gothic. This mid-90s TV show is a great model for how a demon in human form could infiltrate deeply into a community, maintain thralls and get away with murder.





CHAPTER ONE: SIGNED IN BLOOD

We have altogether a confounded, corrupt, and poisoned nature, both in body and soul; throughout the whole of man there is nothing that is good.

—Martin Luther, *The Table-Talk of Martin Luther*

FALLING STARS

David—

You wanted me to let you know if the magazine received any submissions regarding demons or possession — well, here you go. We started getting this copy in a serialized format starting about a month ago, delivered by courier with no return address. We've got three chapters' worth so far, but nothing on the author yet. Just a title: "Falling Stars." Rich, our senior editor, said to hold onto everything to see if we get a complete story, but we haven't gotten anything else in a couple weeks, so I'm starting to have my doubts. Still, we may yet run the segments we have, so don't go showing this to anyone else, or it's my ass.

Why are you so interested in this stuff all of a sudden?

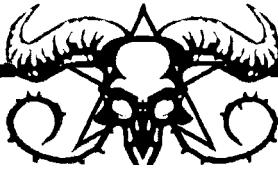
LASTING SCARS

There was a light rain, and the streetlights' glow spread softly over his windshield.

Familiar worries worked their way across Tony's mind. The homework assignments he had to mark, that documentary he'd failed to tape again, bills upon bills... It was Dian's birthday in a month, and he didn't know what to do about it. He was tired, but he kept his gaze alert on the road.

When the car hit him, it was from behind, at a slight angle, drowning everything out with the crunch of metal against metal, sudden static from the radio and then lights spinning, spinning fast. He punched his foot to the ground, not even sure which pedal he was hitting. All instinct left him, and after that perilous plunge toward the steering wheel and back, he seemed frozen in place. Only the lights were moving.

But he must have done the right thing after all, because he suddenly realized that his car had come to a halt and he appeared to be in one piece. Shakily, he opened the door and got out.



"Hey, what the hell? I mean, are you all right? I didn't see... I mean, shit."

The guy who had hit him was young, not much older than the kids at his school. He had the unguarded expression of someone handing in an assignment copied verbatim from last year's examples. Tony tried to ignore him. He meditated quietly for thirty seconds, then checked himself for injuries. His arm had been jarred against the dashboard, and it felt a bit tender, but that was it. Even the damage to his Toyota wasn't as bad as he had thought. The car had skidded ten or fifteen meters by the look of it, fishtailing somewhat, but not actually hitting anything. Pretty much all the lights at the rear end were broken and one corner was crumpled inward. *Great*, he thought. Worse, it looked like the wheel was off kilter. Could that be the axle? He wasn't sure he wanted to know.

Now the guy was asking him if he could borrow a pen so they could exchange details. Another car drove past, interested eyes peering briefly out of them.

The back window had cracked. In fact... Tony's frown deepened as he looked at it. It was still cracking. Fine lines were running through the glass, which he was pretty sure wasn't supposed to happen. But more than that, the cracks that were already there were shifting about subtly, but seemingly with purpose.

Tony remembered a time only a week or two ago. Walking into the boys' toilets, just a standard check after school. A student – Robin Johnson – had been there looking at his bare torso in a mirror, and then he'd looked up in horror at the intrusion. There had been scars covering the boy's torso – an intricate, shifting web of them.

"Hey," the young man who had just rammed Tony's car said.

There was some dreadful portent there, in the back window of his car. Tony ran.

† † †

The call to Pendrick's office came at lunch the next day. Keith Pendrick was counselor at the high school, an unenviable task if there ever was one, though there were far worse places one could be assigned. *Always the way*, Tony mused in the corridor. The wait outside the closed door made him feel vaguely like he was back at Uni, waiting for a tutor. Always somewhere worse. But he was ushered in and waved to a seat quickly enough.

"I heard about the accident yesterday," the counselor started. "Sorry about that."

"Good God, this isn't about that is it? I don't need trauma counseling for having some asshole run into the back of me."

Pendrick grinned, waved his hand casually. "No, no, just heard it somewhere. This is a different matter."

"The Johnson case?"

"Mmm, yes. Except there is no case."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning, Mr. Spruce," Pendrick said with a mock seriousness that Tony found a particularly annoying affectation, "that this is formal notification to say that an investigation into Robin Johnson's circumstances has proved negative. No abuse. Everything's fine."

"Hey, that's great. I mean, I had to say something, because—"

"Of course, it's your job. In fact, you'll probably get a letter of thanks from the Department this week, but I thought I better let you know as soon as possible."

A strange, uneasy silence fell between them. Tony felt like he should leave.

"So," he said. "There was some reason for the scarring?"

"Yes, I imagine so."

"But you don't know?"

"It's all in the report. Confidential, of course."

"But you don't know."

Pendrick's eyes narrowed, and he sighed, looking suddenly older, somehow more real than the thirty-something man playing at being hip.

"Tony, there is no problem. You've done your bit, and that's all that needed doing."

"Did you *see* those scars? They weren't random." He closed his eyes, seeing them again. The second time – a day after the incident in the toilets – had been clearer, less dizzying. Don't Touch was the first and last rule of teacher-student relations, but he'd had to. He'd had to pull back Robin Johnson's sleeve and see the damage there. And to confirm...

"They moved," he finished, regretting the words immediately.

"Pardon me?"

"Nothing."

Uneasy silence again.

"I better go," Tony said.

"Hey, fair enough, and thanks again." They got up and shook hands. Pendrick's wry smile was back, and Tony wondered if anybody ever fell for it.

INQUIRIES

At home that evening, he stretched out on his favorite chair and tried to position his arm so that the ache from yesterday's accident didn't take hold again. There were two messages on his answering machine from the legal representative of the other driver. The second message made an arch reference to Tony's lack of insurance.

Dinner had been awful. Seven months since Dian died, and he still couldn't cook a decent steak – couldn't even buy one, he suspected.

CHAPTER ONE

The unmarked assignments on Alpine Glaciation looked at him accusingly. He closed his eyes and saw the marks dug (burned?) into Robin Johnson's flesh.

He would see Robin tomorrow. He would say something. He would have to.

Except that Tony suspected that Robin wasn't even going to be at school.

† † †

120 Rochester was a narrow house, set back from the pavement with the fence at each side of it falling into disrepair. Tony paused at the fence, winded from the walk up the hill from the bus stop, trying to get an idea of the inhabitants. The lawn was in better condition than the fence, but only slightly. Other than that, he had no idea. He went to the door and rang the bell.

There was no answer for a long time. He rang the bell again and considered looking around the sides to see if something was wrong — except that this was getting ridiculous. He rang a third time and then gave up, except of course that that was when the door opened.

Robin Johnson stood there, looking thin and tired. "Helen said you should go away," the boy said.

That destroyed most of the things Tony was going to say, but he pressed on regardless.

"Hello, Robin. You weren't in class today."
Nothing.

"I was just passing and, ah, wondered if I could come in for a minute. Is your mother, ah, Helen at home?"

"Helen's here."

"Can I come in?"

Robin shrugged and wandered back up the corridor further into the house, leaving the door ajar. Tony followed.

It was gloomy in the hallway, although a light was on in a room beyond the far door. Tony's delay had caused him to lose sight of the boy, but then Robin was silhouetted by that light and Tony hurried after.

He didn't really know what he was doing. Maybe it was all a mistake — dangerous even, for his career. He had hoped to start with some small talk, see Robin in his home environment, try to judge what stresses the boy was under. He had hoped to do something useful and justify the trust his pupils put in him. Maybe it was even the accident last night that had helped make the decision, even more than Pendrick's whitewash. Whatever freaky thing Tony had thought he'd seen, it had been a reminder of things preying upon his mind.

Maybe the small talk was out, he reflected as he walked through the corridor, but he had to do something.

He passed out of the darkness and into the light.

† † †



"What in God's name are you doing?"
Tony bolted upright, turned toward the door, pushing the filing cabinet hurriedly shut.

"Keith. Hi. I was just... waiting for you." Pendrick shut the door behind him and walked into his office. He stepped lightly, like a predator.

"This is my afternoon off."
"Yeah. Oh right, yeah. I... forgot."
"I could have your job for this."
There was no surprise in the counselor's voice, even as he had come in, Tony realized.
"Who investigated the Johnsons?" he asked.
"Leave them alone." No surprise, but there was fear.

"It was you, wasn't it?"
"Get out of here."
"What the hell is in that house?"
Pendrick looked like he wanted to cross himself. Even the thought of it on that usually smarmy countenance was both scary and absurd.
"Not your business. It's not anybody's business." He sounded like he only hoped that was true.

Tony walked toward the door, keeping his gaze steady on the other man's own.

"You've got to keep your spare somewhere safer than that," he said, dropping the little key for the filing cabinet into Pendrick's hand. He left the office and went back to the staff room for lunch.

All through his afternoon classes, some part of Tony was expecting a summons of one sort of the other. He found himself watching the lengthening of the shadows with a small amount of fascination, and he lost his place on the page more than once. After class, one of the girls asked him if he was feeling all right. He assured her he was. "Cool," she said.

Robin was in one of the later classes, and the two gave only a quick glance at each other as he walked in. Afterward, Robin hurried away, which was for the best.

Finally the last bell rang, and nobody had asked Tony to go anywhere. He took the bus home.

MYSTERIES

The second time Tony went to visit Helen Johnson, he took a tape recorder with him. He wasn't sure if that was legal or not. He seemed to recall something about it being illegal only for police officers, which didn't make any sense at all, but he started an elaborate story for the young man at the office supplies center about a novel he was writing. The young man obviously didn't care, and although he was resigned to such reactions in the classroom, Tony was happy to taper off and take his purchase away. It was one of those recorders

that took tiny little tapes and fit neatly into his shirt pocket.

Listening back to the tape later, Tony discovered that his own voice, and briefly that of Robin's, was muffled and indistinct. Maybe the machine had been around the wrong way or something. But Helen's voice was recorded with a clarity greater than any magnetic tape should be able to hold.

"My wife died," Tony had told her. (*My wife dyed*) "Golden staph infection. Just a routine operation, they said, but she never came home."

"I cannot bear your children," Helen had said. It sounded as if she were in the room with him now.

Tony played that five times, trying to work out if the answer meant anything. Had she meant bear as in "carry," or as in "tolerate"? Perhaps something else entirely, he couldn't tell.

"My kids all hate me," he'd continued. "They don't care what I teach them. The only ones who'll make any use of it will go on to be science teachers because they can't find anything better."

It sounded like Robin had said something then, but Tony could neither make it out nor remember it now.

"My circulation is bad," Helen had said. "The great tower falls inward, the feather escapes but does not fly."

"Jesus fucking Christ," Tony said. He threw the recorder across his empty room.

It was gibberish. The scientific method had fallen short. He rolled his eyes as if this had meant to be profound. Nothing about this was scientific. It had all been gibberish from the moment he had seen her. He slumped into his couch. He had a headache, his arm hurt, and he dimly realized that he hadn't eaten anything since breakfast. When he closed his eyes, little flashes of light crossed the darkness. Random sparks along the optic nerve, he knew, except they looked more like stars.

The little red light on the answering machine was flashing at him, and he felt like throwing that away from him as well. He sighed, and hit PLAY.

The first message was from Lisa, from the teacher's car pool, saying she couldn't make it tomorrow. That meant he had to get up at six or take a taxi, which he could not afford. The second was from a real estate agent, inviting him to participate in the fantastic new tax advantages opening up in the home market at the moment. The third was Dian's mother, Audrey, asking how he was.

Great, he thought, erasing them all. The only one who cares is my ex-mother-in-law.

The thought was just a way of finding his balance again, turning a wry gaze on the situation, and he knew it was unfair. He liked Audrey, and they'd tried to keep in contact

since the funeral, but the grief was always there between them. Now was not the time.

Now was not the time for anything, he realized. Not for eating, not for sleeping. He had not felt this way since the days after Dian's death, yet this was different as well. In some way that he hated, this was worse. The only thing he wanted to do was go around to Helen Johnson's house again and ask her if he was going mad. Except that whatever she said, he thought it would mean he was.

CONFRONTATION

"Can I see you for a moment, Robin?" Tony said, as the boy headed for the door.

"Yeah, Mr. Spruce?"

"That book you were asking about, I have a copy of it." Even as he said it, it sounded deeply stupid to him, but as usual, no one else noticed.

Robin sighed. "Yeah, sure." They went back to Tony's office.

"Tell me about Helen," Tony said when he closed the door behind them.

The boy shivered and didn't say anything.

"I've been trying to do some reading about what she's been saying. Angels and things."

"She says you should forget all that."

"Forget what she was saying?"

"No, forget what you have been reading."

"I am sick of this. Really and truly," Tony said, looking out at the school oval below his window. "She has Pendrick running scared. She has me running scared. So just talk to me. Don't worry about what she says, just tell me what you want to say."

"She is my sister."

Tony digested that. That Helen was any sort of relation to Robin – to the real world, really – hadn't occurred to him. "Go on."

"She's eighteen, used to work as a courier, sort of. She worked in the office, for that ZipAbout company, except she wanted to be a real courier."

"So she wasn't always like... *that*?"

Robin stared at him. "No, no. She was great. She was like a big sister, I guess. Except less annoying." The boy smiled tentatively.

"Show me your arm again."

Robin took off his jacket and rolled up the sleeve. Tony glanced outside again, as if the principal would be making a surprise circuit of the second story windows. Then he forgot all that.

The arm was etched – there was no other word for it. You could not mistake it for a tattoo, and certainly not for any natural effect. Lines maybe a quarter of an inch deep ran between puckered and discolored bits of skin like cigarette burns. There was no discernable pattern. Yet there was a pattern. It ran deeper

than you could discern, but you knew that it was there.

The vertiginous feeling that had gripped him before returned, except now – having been closer to the true source of it – Tony fought it, looked long and hard. The lines did not move; did not stretch or pulse or show the future.

He could not tell if there were more scars than there had been two weeks ago. He didn't want to ask. He nodded for Robin to roll down his sleeve again.

"She did that to you."

"I guess. She said she... wants me. All of me."

Tony looked at him sharply. "How?"

If the boy could tell what he meant, he showed no sign, and if this admission was more shameful than anything else, it did not show in his voice. "I don't know. Like a slave or something, I think. She has words that I don't understand, and I don't think she understands them either. She says she wants... me."

"OK, look, fuck this for a joke. Fuck her. We have to go to the police or a doctor. She is ill, obviously, and we've just been jumpy. Stupid. She's confusing us. We can tell them something, and—"

"That's what my parents did," said Robin softly, cutting through Tony's growing anger like a scalpel.

"Your parents?" He hadn't thought of them at all since first meeting Helen.

"Yes. They're dead now."

It was like he was in her presence again, his breath and blood solidifying, his brain seized with a panic that could not express itself in any way but an internal scream.

"Are you all right?" Tony said eventually, very cautiously, pushing aside his own distress. "You've been coming to school. Most days. How do you... feel?"

"Sometimes I want to kill myself. Sometimes I want to kill everyone. In class, just then, there is a girl who sits in front of me. I wanted to cut off all her hair and choke her on it. Force it down her throat. But I can't. I can't." For the first time, Robin started to cry. "I know it's wrong. But I cannot do it because she tells me not to do it. She says killing is a sin."

The crying continued, quietly but forcefully, and for a moment, Tony was scared all over again. He wanted to run, like he had before.

It was only one girl, really. One strange girl, and the crazy things she said, and the fear he felt when she looked at him. Only that, and in the face of that, it seemed he could not trust any of the institutions he had grown up among. But he had to trust in the decisions he had made, the people he had chosen to nurture and protect – to teach.

So instead of running, he hugged Robin Johnson and murmured soft words. He tried to think of the name of the student that the boy had threatened. Lisa, that was it. A friendly girl, if ever so slightly thick. "It's all going to be fine," he said. He knew that neither of them believed it.

BOUND TO DARKNESS

For the next few days, nothing much seemed to happen. Sometimes Tony met Pendrick in the hallways, except the counselor refused to meet his gaze. Robin turned up to school with the same lost expression that blended in with the boredom and repressed frustration of all those around him.

Tony contrived to have Lisa Corliss – the girl who sat in front of Robin – join a group project with some students who congregated on the other side of the room. Maybe it wouldn't help, but then just maybe it would save a life, or at least forestall the temptation to take it. If Robin interpreted that as a show of mistrust, he didn't show it. Tony didn't much care.

A weekend came, although not before the quote for the damage caused to his car. It was all academic anyhow. Somehow he had gotten to the point where he regretted even the expense of that tape recorder he had smashed. That was nothing to do with Helen Johnson – or whatever that *thing* was that lived at 120 Rochester. That was all his own screwed-up life. At least his arm had calmed itself with only the odd painful twinge.

On Monday, Robin had another day away from school. When Tony saw the empty chair, he knew the time had come for him to do something. Anything, really. Letting things slide was just not an option. He was not prepared, because he didn't know how to prepare. It wasn't even that he was being brave. *But maybe I am*, he mused to himself as he stared at his hollow reflection in the windows of the bus. *Maybe I am being brave, and I'm just too fucked up to notice.*

Whatever. When he reached 120 Rochester, the door was open, and he went inside.

† † †

Really, it was only an ordinary lounge-room in a suburban house. The last of the day's sunlight filtered in through the floral curtains and lay across a bookcase across one wall. The sparse furniture looked comfortable. The kitchen that was visible over a counter looked homey, with notices and old photos and strange gaudy magnets stuck to the fridge.

In the middle of all that, sitting on the floor in jeans and a shapeless pullover, was the demon.

"I have something for you," Helen said when Tony walked in.

"You have nothing I want," Tony replied, trying to be bold. A strange effect transformed the girl's face for a moment, half a snarl, half a ripple coursing up through flesh. Tony sobbed and fell forward onto his knees. The pain jarred him back toward conscious thought again, but the force of Helen's personality was like a gale he had to brace himself against. Under her gaze the room felt illusory, wafer-thin and yet also huge beyond measurement. It felt like the two of them were in a house-colored void, light years in diameter.

"I remember a field now, where the dead fell from the sky. I remember the first word for sunset became a terrible curse."

"Let Robin go," Tony said.

"Games sharpen the mind. Without school he is my eyes that are blind."

"He is not your eyes, he is not your—" Tony sprang forward, trying to distract that force of presence pushing at him. He swung a clumsy fist down at the upturned face, and somehow the girl seemed to flow sidewise, tripping him up. As he yelled and flailed for balance, her hand speared up into his arm and he screamed in pain, hit the ground hard. Through the pain she was still there, pushing into his mind. Tony curled into a protective ball, trying to hold onto himself.

"There are others, now. Others in the world that will bow and acknowledge I exist. I need a raiment. I hear my name as they speak it. Cool."

"You're mad," gasped Tony.

"I am madness." Then she was standing, screaming down at him. "Look at me. Am I not madness?"

"Yes," was all Tony could say, and he believed it utterly.

"I have something for you," she said, still talking far too loud.

"Not my wife. You can't do that. I won't let you."

"Shhh," she purred, and stroked his wounded arm, which sent strange eddies of pain pulsing up and down it. "Not your wife, then, if you do not believe me worthy of her. What then?"

Tony looked up at her. The sun was all but gone, but what was left cast a strange corona around her. Her eyes were black, and in them was all the world reduced to nothingness.

"I want to understand," he said.

"You want to be able to trace the patterns of the stars and the movement of the heavens?"

He nodded.

"You will be my raiment. To Robin, I am only a sister, no matter what I do. I could eat his intestines, and the name he would curse would not be mine. To you, however, I am..."

"Everything," he finished.

She smiled. "Not quite, but you understand." And he did.

SIREN SONG

January 5-

I've never done this sort of thing in my life. Diaries are for adolescent girls, not middle-aged executives. But so much has happened over the last few months, and it's getting hard to keep it all straight. It's so hard to think anymore, to focus on how all this happened. She's doing it to me, somehow. I'm sure of it. If I can't find a way to get my head right, then she's won. And I can't let that happen.

Anyway, I'm getting ahead of myself.

It wasn't like I went out looking for a new friend, for starters. I've got plenty of friends, even if I did lose a few of them in the divorce. There were occasions when I wished I'd lost a few more of them because they wouldn't leave me alone. Most of the time I just felt like sitting in the house and crying over the years I'd wasted on that arsehole of a husband. My friends, though, they kept trying to drag me out to social events and dinner parties in the hope of cheering me up. I'm sure they meant well, but really, sitting talking with a few married couples does nothing but rub in exactly what I've lost. I'm in my 40s now, and that just isn't a good time of life to be single. Well, not if you're female, anyway. If you're a man, I'm sure you can just flash your wallet and car at some teenager, and all of the sudden you've got yourself a new relationship. It worked for my husband - more than once by all accounts. Amazing the things your friends will tell you once your husband has left you, isn't it?

Anyway, the Dennys had been badgering me to come to one of their dinner parties for months after Brian left me. He and I had been close friends with them while we were still together, so I kept dodging the invites, worried that they'd bring back bad memories or, worse, happy ones. Eventually, though, I couldn't put it off any longer. I didn't want to go, but I didn't want to come across as rude either. I knew they were trying to be kind to me, even if they didn't really understand how I was feeling.

I didn't get much done in the office that day because I was too busy dreading the evening. My boss didn't give me any hassle over it, but I knew he'd be picking at me tomorrow. He doesn't like to confront problems until they've resolved themselves, you see. He's power-crazed and spineless all at once. Anyway, I digress.

I was fretting because I knew the form all too well - Catriona and David were nothing if not predictable hosts. The house would be impeccable, their children packed off to bed or to their grandparents' house, and both of the Dennys

would be groomed and polished to within an inch of their lives. The food would be from the latest Nigella or Jamie cookbook, and the other guests would all be good, respectable, hard-working couples. In short, it would be the very embodiment of the Home Counties middle-class dream I had thought I was living, until my husband moved in with a woman less than half his age.

In almost every way I was right. Catriona looked stunning in an expensive black sheath dress, with a string of pearls around her neck, and David was doing the sports casual thing very well. He looked the consummate successful City businessman and quite handsome, as ever. David and I used to flirt a lot while I was with Brian, but that all dried up once I became a single woman again. Funny how quickly your life can change, isn't it?

THE OTHER GUEST

January 6-

Where was I? For once Catriona and David weren't the centre of attention. As well as the normal range of faceless couples, there was another single woman there, by the name of Jenny. Now, I'd seen her once or twice across rooms at parties over the last few years but had never really taken much notice of her. She's always been well dressed, but she seemed pretty self-absorbed and managed to get people's backs up, as I recall. I probably looked down my nose at her from my position of smug married "bliss," just like some of the women at this party were doing to her.

Watching her now, I can't believe that I ever failed to notice her. Maybe she's changed in the last few months, because I don't remember her ever getting as much attention as she was doing that night. She's about the same age as the rest of us, but she positively glows. Marriage and work seems to bleed the life out of many people. Jenny had more life in her than the rest of the people at that party put together. I admit, like many of the women present, I didn't take to her at first. It's an instinctive thing, really. After you've been married a while, you start becoming suspicious of single women around your husband. Maybe I should have been more suspicious about Brian's behaviour, but I always thought that without trust you didn't have a relationship. Turns out that even with trust, I didn't have a relationship.

However, somehow Jenny conspired to violate Catriona's anal little seating plan and sit next to me. It clearly annoyed Catriona, and her happy mask almost cracked. She managed to work around it in the end, but not without letting her displeasure be known.

Jenny struck up a conversation with me and, for a while, I felt like my world had shrunk down to just her. She was so interested in me. I couldn't believe it. She wasn't interested in my marriage

breakdown or how I felt about it, or in mouthing platitudes about what a bastard Brian was or anything like that. Instead, she was interested in me, as a person, in isolation from that disaster of a marriage. Sure, we talked a little about my feelings of helplessness and my regrets that we'd never had kids, but she also drew out of me my desires and hopes and what I really wanted to do with my life. Some long-buried dreams arose during the course of that conversation, and I began to feel like I had some hope for the future for the first time in months.

It couldn't last, though. We couldn't just completely ignore the other guests for the whole of the meal. Slowly, reluctantly, we turned our attention to the others. Somehow, though, it remained Jenny and I against the rest. She would occasionally lean over and whisper to me about some little nuance of behaviour or body language that I'd missed. I began to realise for the first time how liberating it was being single. Jenny would slightly nudge me every time she saw a wife throw her husband a quick look, seeking approval or conveying a quick reprimand. Each half of the couple's behaviour was constrained by the other. It wasn't something I'd really noticed before, but Jenny made it pretty clear for me. I looked at her with a new respect. She had a sharp eye.

In particular, she pointed out to me the problems between Cati and David. Once you started looking at their body language, it was obvious. The perfect couple was far from perfect, much to my delight. There was no warmth or love in evidence. No little touches of affection between them at all. Even Steve and Suzanne were doing that, and Steve's so damn repressed that I sometimes wonder how the two of them got together in the first place.

I can honestly say that Jenny opened my eyes to a whole new way of looking at my friends and my own life that evening. In the end, we got a taxi home together. I think Cati was relieved see the back of the pair of us. I certainly saw her shoot Jenny a dirty look as we left. She even tried to persuade me to stay a bit longer, just to get me away from Jenny, I think.

THE LAIR

January 8-

Jenny obviously has some cash. How do I know? Simple. She invited me in for a drink at her place. Now, there's no way I'd ordinarily have accepted, but I was a bit tipsy by the time we left - the 1997 rioja had been flowing pretty freely over dinner - and Jenny was just so much fun to be with that I couldn't resist. It was the first evening that I really remember laughing since Brian left me, and I didn't want it to stop because I knew that the bad feelings would be straight back.



maybe after all that time being the good little wife, I wanted to live again. Going back to a strange woman's house for a drink was a little adventure for me, albeit a pretty safe one.

She lives in one of those posh new apartments in the town centre. They're expensive for what they are, but what property isn't these days? It was pretty classily decorated, too. It was starkly minimalist in places and luxuriously appointed in others, like her bedroom, bathroom and kitchen. When I'd asked Jenny about the contrast, she said that the minimalist rooms always reminded her of where she came from and everything she had to lose. Fair enough, I thought.

We talked for hours. Looking back, I can't remember that much of what Jenny said, but I know I talked about my life in a depth I hadn't for years. I really opened up to this woman, a virtual stranger, and it felt great. It was sort of like being with your teenage best friend, with that feeling of total openness and constant communication. I hadn't enjoyed myself as much for as long as I could remember.

With a start, I realised that it was now 3:00 am and I really needed to get some sleep. Jenny said I was welcome to crash in the spare room, but in the end I got a taxi home. Call me middle-aged, but I do like the comfort of my own bed. Brief trips into your teenage years are all well and good, but your own comfy PJ's and hot water bottle are the building blocks of life.

MENTOR FROM HELL

January 10-

Jenny and I stayed in contact and went out for drinks and the odd meal in the evenings. I think it was easier to go out with her than my friends, because it didn't feel like my old life with Brian missing. This felt like something new and exciting.

It didn't take long for Jenny and I to become firm friends. She was a complete force of nature. You couldn't help but be swept up in her wake. We went shopping one afternoon at the sort of boutiques I normally walk past because they don't have any prices in the window (and we all know what that means). I think we must have tried on about a hundred outfits each by the time the shop shut. I don't ever remember having so much fun in my life. We laughed ourselves silly at some of the gear we tried on.

Mind you, we ended up spending quite a bit of money between the two of us this afternoon. Jenny's outfits were a little more daring than I was prepared to risk, but I certainly came away with a far more striking wardrobe than I'd ever had before. I'll say one thing for Jenny: She was darned good at telling where the lines between

classy, stylish, sexy and tacky lay. She kept us neatly in the first three without ever resorting to the latter. Oh, and she had an eye for accessories to die for. If I could accessorise like she does, I could make a living as a stylist or personal shopper, rather than slogging away in the accounts department like I do. I wasn't surprised to learn that Jenny had worked in the fashion industry "before." I asked her "Before what?" and she just laughed and said, "Before I escaped." I knew the fashion business could be demanding, but I couldn't see why anyone would voluntarily quit it. She smiled, a little sadly I thought, and said that she hoped to tell me all about it one day.

I'd known Jenny for about a month when I started suspecting that there was something unusual about her. For a start, she disappeared for a week at one point and was pretty vague about where she'd been when she got back. I didn't press the point. It was none of my business, right? She'd also sometimes break off in mid-conversation and just stare off into space, mouthing words as if she was talking to someone who wasn't there. Her usual explanation was that she was just thinking something through, and I usually accepted it. It wasn't like it happened very often.

The most noticeable thing, though, was the fact that she seemed to be able to read the minds of people she was talking to. Yeah, I know, sounds weird, doesn't it? I can't explain the way she was able to deduce what people were interested in any other way, though. Reading body language and interpreting what people say carefully is one thing - she taught me those skills easily enough - but the sort of information she was gleaning just wasn't right. She could guess facts about people's lives that she shouldn't have been able to know. Once or twice, it looked like a good party trick, but when I'd seen her do it repeatedly over a period of weeks, it began to look really suspicious. I really wish I'd paid more attention to that.

Don't get me wrong: I've seen some pretty odd stuff in my time. I used to be part of a fairly evangelical church, before my failure to conceive shook my belief in the guy upstairs. Some of the people there did some pretty freaky stuff with laying on of hands, words of power and other gifts of the spirit. This was different, though, because it was happening in the oddest places, rather than in a church where everyone was reinforcing each other's belief. It got me thinking about God as I lay alone in my bed at home. There was something different about Jenny. It didn't seem to come from any religious belief. She'd never made any mention of that. Whatever it was, I wanted some of it, simply because I wanted to be like Jenny.

So you remember the cool kid at school? You remember how you always wanted to hang around

with them and tried to be like them. Well, this was like that but more extreme. Genny was living the life I'd always fantasised about having during the dull later years of my marriage. It was starting to work, too. I'd had quite a few guys try to chat me up when I'd been out with Genny. Not as much attention as Genny got, admittedly, but enough to do my shattered ego some good. Maybe there could be life after Brian.

It was making a difference at work, too. My boss was a bit of a geek, to be honest. For a long time he and my husband were the bane of my lives. Two middle-aged men who enjoyed whatever little power they had far too much. I remember chatting to Genny about Nigel (that's my boss's name) one Friday evening as we chatted on the phone. She and I were gossiping about idiots who caused us trouble, after she made a fool out of some drunken businessman who tried to pick her up when we had a meal in a local Italian last week.

I started talking about Nigel and she gave me some advice on how to handle him better. It was all pretty good stuff. She came round to my place the next day, chucking away half my work clothes as being "too androgynous" and then assembled some outfits from what was left that were "a little more dramatic." I'd never seen myself as power dresser, but I trusted her.

"Clothes are a tool," she said. "Guys like Nigel will see the clothes before the woman inside. It's just another social weapon, a way of resetting the power balance between the two of you before you even open your mouth. Look at me. I'm 40-something and no stunner, but I know how to create an impression."

It worked. Nigel's attitude towards me changed pretty rapidly. Once I stopped meekly doing what he said - after he'd found his tongue again after seeing my new look - he backed down pretty quickly. Seems he was used to people just obeying him because of his position. He wasn't used to being challenged. It was fun. Genny was delighted when I told her all about it later in the week.

THE DEAL

January 12

It was the following Saturday afternoon when I learnt some of the truth about Genny. She and I were sitting in a Starbucks in Brighton, enjoying a coffee and cake after a hard day's shopping. I was so pleased with her changes to my work wardrobe that I asked her to help me revamp my whole look. She suggested a day trip to Brighton, and we'd spent the day scouring the Laines, Churchill Square and the rest of the town centre. As usual, I'd tried on dozens of things but ended up taking her advice on what to buy. Well, why shouldn't I? She was really good at this

stuff, and I was getting noticed in a way I never had before, both at work and in the first beginnings of a new social life. I hadn't even thought of my ex in the last couple of days. I was really beginning to enjoy life.

Genny was stirring her coffee thoughtfully and looking at me in a calm, studied way. "You really trust me, don't you?" she asked, sounding unusually seriously.

"Of course I do, Genny," I replied. "You've never been anything but good for me. I don't know what I'd have done without you the last few months."

Genny smiled at that and reached out to play with my hair. She was a really tactile individual. It had taken me a while to get used to that, as I'd never been that touchy-feely myself. Still, I enjoyed it now, but not in a sexual way. It was just affectionate, you know? It felt good. One of the things I missed most when I broke up with Brian was being held, so any human contact was appreciated. Besides, it was amazing the effect two women casually touching each other had on some guys. It makes me laugh thinking of the boggle-eyed looks some of the guys in the coffee shop were giving us.

"You've really enjoyed it, haven't you? Our time together has really meant something to you."

I took her hand. "Yes, it has, Genny. I married young and was never particularly popular at school. When I broke up with Brian, I really believed that I'd blown my chance to have fun. I believed I was over the hill. You've given me a whole new lease on life by showing me how to have fun again."

"I can make it even better, you know."

"Oh, do tell."

"You know the way I can 'read' people, like I've been teaching you to do?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Well, there's a bit more to it than I've let on. I'll teach you that and a way to make yourself more irresistible, if you want."

"Wow, are you serious? Of course. I'd love it."

"Are you certain, Linda? There's no going back."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, if I do this and you accept, you and I will be bonded together. We'll be more than just friends the way we are now. We'll be pretty damn inseparable."

I'd never known her to be this cautious before. Perhaps that should have given me some clue that what was about to happen was unusual, even for Genny. Dangerous, even. Still, how could I have known?

"Yeah, you silly cow, of course I'm sure. That sounds like a good thing to me, not a bad thing."

"I may need something from you in return later on. I want you to be aware of that."

"Come on, Jenny. After all you've done for me? How on earth could I possibly refuse you?"

Jenny smiled and released my hand. "Drink up, my friend, and we'll talk about this later." And with that, she downed the rest of her tall, skinny latte in one.

THE PACT

January 13-

We spent another few hours shopping, but my heart wasn't in it. I wanted to know what she'd meant, but I knew better than to hurry Jenny by now. She does things in her own good time. She suggested that we grab some dinner in a hotel restaurant down on the seafront. We checked our bags into the cloakroom and chatted about this and that over dinner. I was bursting with curiosity but managed to hold my tongue.

Jenny then suggested that we go for a walk along the beach before picking up her car and heading back home. It was dark by then, and for a moment I worried about how safe we'd be, but somehow Jenny made those fears melt away. That should have worried me, too, but it didn't.

We walked in silence, enjoying the sounds and sensations of the near-deserted beach. The feel of the cooling sand on my feet was quite delightful, and it was nice to be in relative quiet after the hectic shopping of the day. After a while, Jenny stopped and stared out across the sea, watching the lights from the seafront hotels and bars and the pier play on the rippling water.

"It's beautiful here at night," I said at last, desperate to break the long silence.

"I suppose it is," she replied. "Water means a lot to me, though. Sometimes it brings back happy memories, and sometimes it brings back ones that I don't like."

"There you go again, being mysterious about your past."

"Yeah, well, that's because I'm an angel," she said quietly.

"Yeah, Jenny, an absolute angel. No need to go fishing for compliments from me."

"I'm serious, Linda, just as I was earlier," she said, turning round and looking at me with an intensity that made me back off initially. "I'm offering you a gift, a gift of empathy, understanding and charisma. Do you accept the gift?"

I honestly thought this was just one of her little games, but I sure as hell wanted what she had to offer. Since the moment I laid eyes on her at that bloody dinner party, I'd wanted to be like her, to have her power over her others, her

confidence and lately even her way with men. "Yes, Jenny, I'd love it."

"So be it," she said.

The sea in front of me suddenly surged forward, running straight at me across the shore. I tried to move out of its way, but Jenny's hands were on my arms, holding me in place. The water that was pooling around me surged up and over me, covering my legs, my torso and then my face. At first I panicked and started thrashing around, but still Jenny held me in place. And then, despite myself, I started to calm down. The water felt warm and comforting, like I imagine the womb must have been. I could hear nothing and see nothing, but the water seemed to be seeping into me, becoming part of me, and I wanted it to. I welcomed it, letting it warm me through, even into my very soul.

Then the water subsided, and I was on Brighton beach once more. I wanted the water back, but I heard a voice calling me, telling me to look. I opened my eyes to the most lovely and terrifying sight I had ever seen. Beside me on the beach was the most beautiful creature I had ever set eyes on. I was afraid to look too long in case I went blind or mad, or possibly both. While there was a trace of Jenny in its features, it made her beauty look like that of a crude sculpture that was still a work in progress. This was a beauty so refined, so finished, that I truly never thought I could see anything more pleasing.

And then she spoke. The words burst like music in my eardrums, making me quiver with pleasure as each syllable was formed.

"Thank you, Linda," was all she said, and those words were more sweet than every "I love you" I'd heard throughout my entire life and yet as terrible as every threat and every angry word I've heard.

For a while, we just sat there, my hand still in hers, my mind unable to think of anything but the incredible beauty before me and how terribly afraid I was.

THE GOOD SOLDIER

It all started because I didn't want to die in Pete's Bar, drinking away the rest of my days while the world passed me by.

Yeah, I was feeling sorry for myself. It had been another shitty day of rehab, filling out disability forms and going to pointless job interviews. My legs ached, and the skin on either side of my knees was raw because the braces the VA dug up for me didn't really fit. It was 1:00 in the afternoon. A couple of college kids were cutting classes and playing pool back at the far table, feeding

a steady supply of quarters into the machine. They were wearing varsity jackets - probably football jocks by the way they were built. They'd been going strong for more than two hours, laughing and joking, not a care in the world. I hated them. Hated them for the money they waved around and the easy way they moved. Why did they have things so goddamn easy? I thought about that one long and hard as I worked my way through one beer after another.

That's when it came to me. What's it called? That moment of realization, when it's like you can step back and see through all the bullshit that fills up your life? An epiphany. That's what it was. I sat back in the booth and ran my fingers over the old wood of the tabletop, feeling all the nicks and gouges and carved initials from God knows how many years of use, and I realized that I was as much a fixture at Pete's as the table itself. After all, where else could I go? That little closet of a room at the roach motel up the street? My parent's place in the suburbs?

And that was when I realized that I'd spent every day of the last six months drinking away my disability check at Pete's Bar, and it didn't look like that was going to change anytime soon.

Jesus Christ, I remember thinking. I could die here. Years from now they could find me here in this same fucking booth, face down in a puddle of beer.

I prayed to God as I reached for my glass, "Please," I begged him. Please don't let me die here. If this is a test, I need help. I don't want to be a burden on my family. Please give me a sign.

"Hey, there, hero," came a familiar growl. "The beer taste any better today?"

I looked back over my shoulder and saw Big Jim working his way down the narrow aisle between bar and booths. Big Jim was in his 50s, and had been a regular at Pete's when I was still in grade school. If he had a last name, no one ever spoke it around me. I don't even know why they called him Big Jim, because he wasn't much taller than six feet and kind of wiry. He'd been a Marine in Nam and had scars on his forearms from an enemy grenade. Jim still wore his gray hair in a crewcut and was proud of the anchor-and-globe tattoo on his right arm.

Jim hadn't been around for more than a week, and people had been starting to wonder if the old guy's liver had finally given out. But now he was working his way down to my booth with a spring in his step I hadn't noticed before. He had this sly look in his eyes, like he owned the whole damn world.

"Hey, Jim," I mumbled, not much in the mood to talk. "You're looking awful sly. Been working out?"

The sarcasm just rolled right off him. He nodded at my crutches. Probably not as hard as you have, pal.

I shrugged. The truth was, I'd been working my ass off at the Veteran's Hospital every other day, but the

rehab never seemed to do any good. The therapists were starting to believe I'd never walk without assistance, but I was damned if I was going to quit.

"So when are you going to tell me how it happened?" Jim asked.

"I'd love to, but it's classified." I replied, feeling sick inside. I wasn't the one who'd started the story. I'd gotten my discharge right when things were heating up in Afghanistan, and people saw my buzz-cut and my crutches and figured I'd been wounded in action. I couldn't bring myself to tell them it was bullshit. I never even made it out of boot. Some numbnuts PFC behind the wheel of a five-ton ran a sign and hit me as I was headed back to the barracks. Uncle Sam put a half dozen pins in each leg and gave me a medical discharge.

All I'd ever wanted to be was a soldier. At Pete's, I still was one. I had my corner booth, and sometimes a regular like Big Jim would buy me a beer.

Yeah, I know, it was a shitty way to act. But if you were in my place I'd bet you'd do the same damn thing.

"When you're ready you can tell me," Jim replied, waving to Pete for a couple beers.

Thanks." I replied. I just don't want Uncle Sam kicking my ass for talking too much.

We both laughed.

The TV screen behind Jim showed a news report about Afghanistan. I couldn't hear the sound, but it was apparently about another cave sweeping operation.

"What I wouldn't give to be there," I said.

Jim glanced back at the TV, then gave me a long look. Why?

"It's the reason why I joined the military in the first place." I replied. I wanted to help defend my country. And I meant it. You can think what you want about me, but that much was true. All my life I wanted to fight against the people who threatened our country. I wanted to defend our freedoms. All I ever asked from God was the chance to serve in the military. I shifted uncomfortably in my seat. Guess He wasn't in much of a giving mood, huh?

Jim's expression was sympathetic, but he still had that mocking gleam in his eye. You could have stayed in the military. Taken a desk job.

"Shit." I shook my head, feeling the old bitterness rise in the back of my throat. I didn't join up to push papers. I wanted to fight, and I was good at it. You can't make a difference in the world doing inventories and filling out requisitions. I shrugged. Then again, maybe I should have stuck it out. At least then I'd have a job.

One of Pete's girls came by the table with the beers. Put it on your tab? she asked Jim, then smiled and headed back to the bar.

"Take Jen, for example." I said, watching her go. "She's got something like a Masters in Business and she works here, for Christ's sake."

Jim just shrugged. "It takes more than a piece of paper to get anywhere in this world."

"Tell me about it," I said, lifting my glass.

"It takes spirit. This world's changed since I was young, and there's damn few opportunities to be had, but that doesn't mean they don't exist. She may have the paperwork, but I'm willing to bet she doesn't have the spirit to get what she wants. Otherwise, why would she be here? It's kill or be killed, Eddie. You ought to know that by now."

Jim raised his glass and took a long drink. The old guy grimaced and stared at the beer like he'd been poisoned and pushed the glass away.

I frowned. "Since when did you object to Pete's beer?"

Jim shot me a sideways look, as though I'd caught him at something. "My tastes must be changing, I guess."

"You don't notice it as much by the third glass. Trust me."

But Jim wasn't in the mood for weak attempts at humor. Instead, he leaned back and folded his scarred arms. That's a lot of bitterness talk for someone your age.

Christ, I remember thinking. Suddenly this guy thinks he's my dad? If there's some reason why I should be singing for joy, I somehow missed it.

"Could be worse. You've got your disability check and a roof over your head."

"I live in a one-room shit hole that eats up most of my monthly check, and when I'm not in rehab I'm getting turned down at job interviews."

"So why not give up then? Move back in with your folks?"

"And live with their pity? No fucking way."

"But it would make your life easier."

"I don't want things to be easy, okay? I hate this shit, but I'll be damned if I'm going to just give up."

I noticed that the bar had gone quiet. Pete was staring at me warily, wiping out a glass. I realized I was clutching one of my crutches almost like a club.

But Jim just smiled, and that gleam in his eye got just a little brighter. That's the spirit, buddy, he said. You can get anything you want in this world if you're willing to fight for it. Why, with that kind of attitude I bet you'll be walking again in no time.

"Hey, I work out with the therapist, but the doctors don't have much faith."

"You shouldn't put your faith in doctors."

"I know, I know. With God, all things are possible. There's a minister at the VA who insists on praying for me."

Jim shook his head slowly. Personally, I don't think He's all that helpful.

"Whatever. Doesn't hurt to ask."

"But more often than not, He doesn't help." Jim paused, eyeing my crutches thoughtfully. I might be able to help, though.

I didn't mean to laugh. "You?"

"Seriously."

Again I laughed. "C'mon, you're a retired mechanic. No offense."

Jim shot me a look that left me cold. You'd be surprised, kid. I know a lot of things you've probably never heard of. Alternative therapies, so to speak.

He was serious. For a moment I just looked at him, unsure what to say.

"I can look into this for you. Maybe I can find a way to cure you. It wouldn't hurt to look, would it?"

I caught my breath. I guess not.

Jim started to say something else but decided against it. He eased his old frame out of the booth. Just think about what I said, okay? I'll be in touch.

I stared down at my empty glass, suddenly feeling guilty. Sorry, I'm not much company tonight.

Jim didn't reply. When I looked up, he was gone.

NO RETREAT

I took the bus to the University of Iowa campus later that afternoon, getting off at the Pentacrest stop. I noticed some contractors working on the Old Capitol building. The university administration said they'd restore the building by early next year. Somehow I thought it would never fully be repaired. Like me, it would be irreparably scarred.

I slowly made my way toward the Pedestrian Mall. It seemed like every few hundred feet I'd have to chase off a guy trying to hand me an ad circular. I could have gotten off at a stop closer to the Mall, but I wanted the workout. I told myself that the extra exercise would help me gain the strength to walk again, and dealing with the pushy ad guys was a small price to pay.

Plus I needed to think. Any other day I would have still been back at the bar working on my fifth or sixth beer, but after talking to Big Jim, it just felt like the walls were closing in on me. What the hell was I doing with my life? Was this all I had to look forward to?

Finally, I made my way into the Ped Mall, walking past the kiosk guarding the entrance. It was filled with so many flyers that it looked like someone had dumped a recycling bin onto a rectangle covered with paste.

There was a group of kids standing by the kiosk eyeing the passersby and whispering to each other. I didn't pay them much attention until a black-haired girl ducked in front of me, dressed in a dark green jacket and wearing Doc Martens. She held up a small sheet of paper with the number 3 crudely scribbled on it.

She giggled. "I'm giving you a three," she said, "because you look really out of it. Plus the military-surplus look just isn't happening for you."

Fucking Ped Mall rat, I thought to myself. I glared at her and tried to work my way around her, but she jumped back into my path.



"Does your mom know you dress like this?"

"Jesus Christ. Get out of my way," I snapped at her, but she kept right on going, hammering it up for her friends.

"And those crutches just have to go. Maybe if they had more color."

"Keep your fucking opinions to yourself, bitch, and get out of my goddamn way!"

"Dude! Chill out," the girl sneered.

"No you chill. In fact, I got a better idea. Why don't you get your tail up to the Hall Mall and join the other losers there. I don't have time for your bullshit."

I heard a voice from behind me. "Don't talk to my girl like that!"

Oh, shit, I thought, kicking myself for being so stupid. She'd set me up, and I'd walked right into it. I shifted on my crutches to see a couple of guys heading my way. The leader was this gangly weasel of a kid, with a purple streak in his hair and a stainless-steel wallet chain banging against his thigh.

"Is he giving you a problem?" the boyfriend said loudly, like he was hot shit facing down a guy in leg braces.

"Yeah," the girl said, stifling a giggle. "I was just trying to help him out, and he went postal on me."

He glared at me. "You'd better apologize to her."

I shook my head. "Just get the fuck out of my way."

The boyfriend moved to within inches of my face. "You apologize to her first! She's just trying to help you out."

"I don't want her help."

The boyfriend grinned. "I think you do, faggot. What you gonna do about that? Huh? I just called you a faggot. You're a crip fag!"

The other punk laughed. I remember gripping the handles of my crutches so hard my knuckles popped.

He slapped me hard.

"What ya going to do about it, fag?"

I started to turn away. He shoved me with both arms, knocking me to the ground. I landed on my elbows, gritting my teeth against the pain. Then he kicked me, a glancing blow against my leg brace that felt like my leg was being shattered all over again. I screamed, and the kid laughed, kicking me again. I let out a yell and tried to swing at the punk, but he easily ducked the swing and leapt back in with another kick.

He was going to beat the shit of me. This worthless little punk was going to beat me down, and there was nothing I could do about it.

The dog came out of nowhere. One minute the kid was standing over me, and the next he was backpedaling as fast as his feet could carry him, and this huge rottweiler stood between us, barking and baring his teeth. I didn't know what the hell was going on. All I cared about

was the pain in my side that burned like a hot coal every time I took a breath.

I don't know how long I lay there hugging my ribs. I could hear the kids' feet pounding away across the pavement and the dog chasing after them. I let out a yell as they faded into the distance. You better run, you sons of bitches! I wanted them to know how much I wanted to beat the hell out of them for what they did, but afterward I realized just how pathetic I sounded.

I lay there for what seemed like an hour, waiting for the pain to fade. The sun set and the pavement grew cold, but the pain was still sharp as ever.

NO SURRENDER

I was tempted to head for Pete's on the way back from the Mall. My hands and elbows were raw from the fall, I probably had a cracked rib, and I still thought long and hard about burying my head in a bottle.

There wasn't any doubt by now that I was in trouble. I was jobless, crippled and an alcoholic, and there was no reason to believe any of this was going to change. As I shuffled back to the boarding house, I thought long and hard about suicide. I had pain pills, and a fifth of vodka would set me up just right. But by the time I started struggling up the stairs to my room I'd rejected the idea. If I quit, I'd be admitting to the world that I really did deserve their pity, and I'd be damned before I let that happen.

The hallway light was out, but that was nothing new. I finally managed to get the key in the lock and had to put my shoulder to the door to get it open. When I pushed, it felt like a hot poker jabbed itself into my side.

There was a sink on the wall to the right of the door. I staggered over to it, fumbling for the string that hung from the bare bulb overhead. In the weak yellow light I saw that I'd picked up a couple of scratches on my face. gingerly I pulled off my jacket and pulled up my sweatshirt, gasping at the pain. The entire right side of my chest was one huge bruise.

"It looks like that little boy did some damage after all. I was afraid that would happen."

The voice seemed to come from everywhere at once. It was quiet and deep, like a purr almost, and it made the air in the room quiver. I could feel it along my skin and down in my bones. I should have been scared shitless, but instead I felt strangely calm.

I turned, and there he was, sitting at the edge of the bed. It was Big Jim. The smug glint was gone from his eyes, and he sat very straight, his hands resting on his knees. His face was still, almost like a statue, and I couldn't help but think how incredibly old he seemed.

"What the hell?" I said dumbly.

"Got it in one," Big Jim said with a grin, and his eyes turned golden like a lion's.

My legs went out from under me, but Jim was there, scooping me up like a child and setting me gently on the bed before I could hit the floor. His grin never faded, but the look in his eyes changed. There was real warmth there, and a kind of sadness I'd never seen before.

The pain had faded, and even my anger was gone. If anything, I felt a little sorry for him, but couldn't understand why.

"What do you want?" was all I could manage to say.

"Your help," Jim said in that soft, penetrating voice.

It's funny how a person's life can turn on a couple of simple words. At that moment it didn't matter who or what Big Jim really was. What mattered was that he needed me.

"But... what can I possibly do?"

Jim smiled. "Don't sell yourself so short, Ed. You've got something that very few people have anymore. You have spirit. That's something precious, believe me." He paused, considering his words carefully. "The world's a pretty shitty place these days, isn't it?"

"Yeah, sure."

"It wasn't always like this." Jim said with a sigh. "It was... well... You'll see." He patted me on my shoulder, like a father would a child. "Ed, I've come back to make a difference here on Earth. This place can be the paradise it once was, but I can't do it alone. I need people like you. People who won't quit no matter how bad things get. Because things might get very bad indeed before they get better. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

My head was spinning. I thought I understood what he meant. I was being called to do something truly worthwhile, something greater than anything else I'd ever dreamed of doing. And there was the sense that this was the only chance I'd ever get.

"You're a demon," I said.

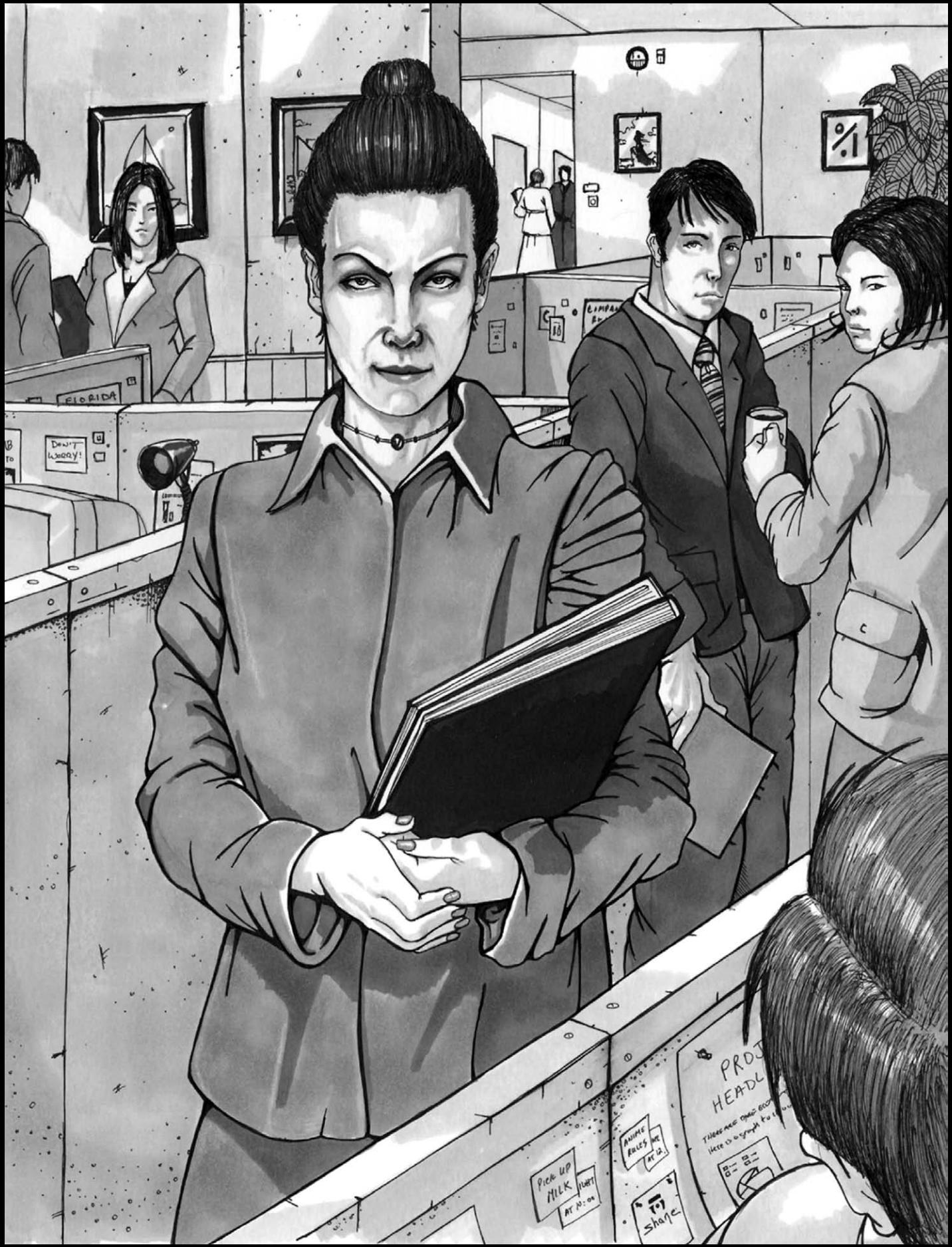
Jim laid his hand over my ribs. I could feel the heat of his skin through my sweatshirt. The warmth seeped into my bones, and I could feel the rib knitting together. It was over in the space of a single breath.

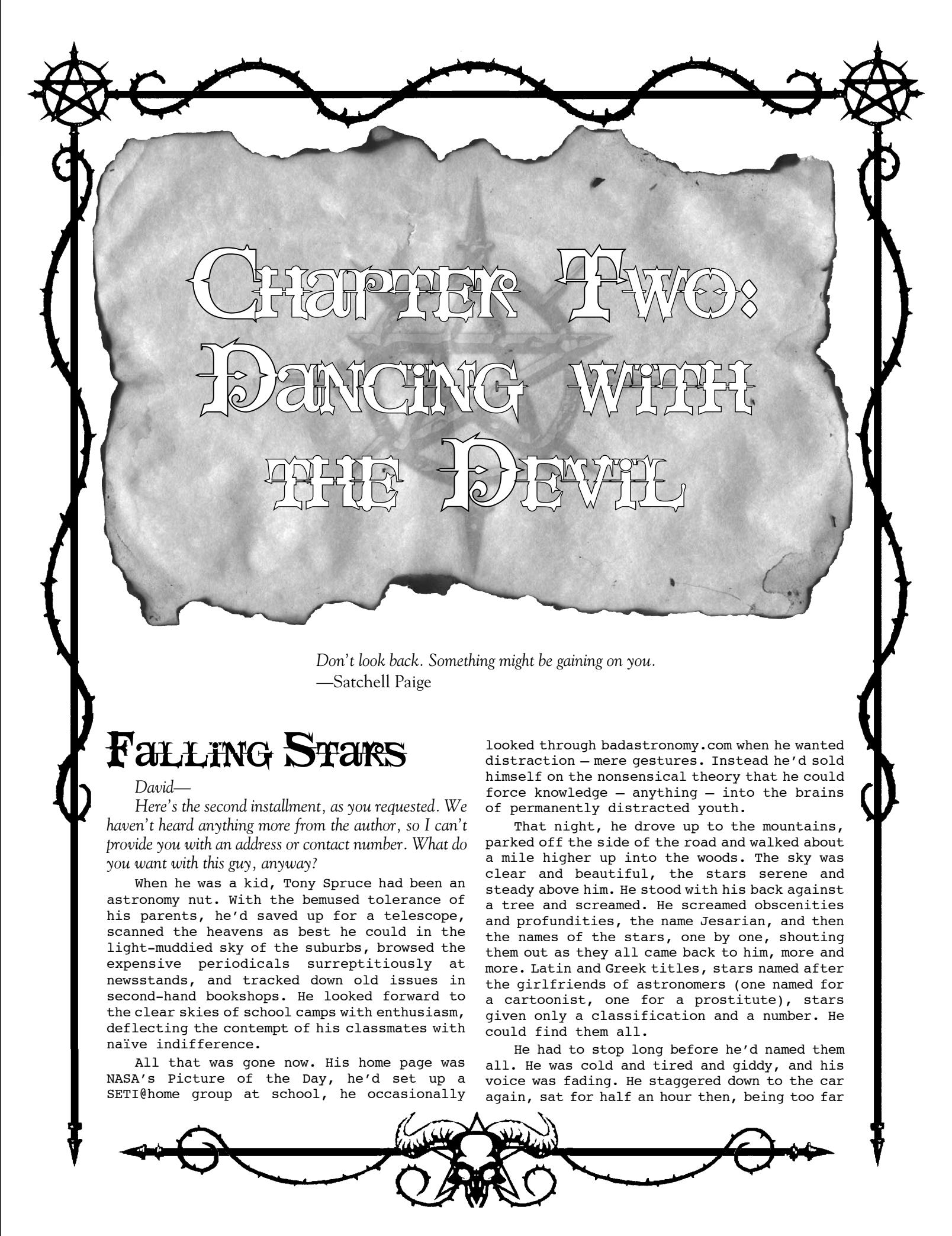
"Demon is a name humanity gave us, long after they forgot why we turned our backs on God," the being inside Jim said. "I'm an angel, Ed. Now and forever."

And I believed him. To this day, after all that has happened, I still believe that everything Jim ever told me was the absolute truth. He was an angel.

It didn't take me long to make up my mind. He needed me. Who else had asked for my help since I'd been crippled? Who else had treated me as someone worthy of respect?

"Where do I sign up?"





CHAPTER TWO: DANCING WITH THE DEVIL

Don't look back. Something might be gaining on you.

—Satchell Paige

FALLING STARS

David—

Here's the second installment, as you requested. We haven't heard anything more from the author, so I can't provide you with an address or contact number. What do you want with this guy, anyway?

When he was a kid, Tony Spruce had been an astronomy nut. With the bemused tolerance of his parents, he'd saved up for a telescope, scanned the heavens as best he could in the light-muddied sky of the suburbs, browsed the expensive periodicals surreptitiously at newsstands, and tracked down old issues in second-hand bookshops. He looked forward to the clear skies of school camps with enthusiasm, deflecting the contempt of his classmates with naive indifference.

All that was gone now. His home page was NASA's Picture of the Day, he'd set up a SETI@home group at school, he occasionally

looked through badastronomy.com when he wanted distraction — mere gestures. Instead he'd sold himself on the nonsensical theory that he could force knowledge — anything — into the brains of permanently distracted youth.

That night, he drove up to the mountains, parked off the side of the road and walked about a mile higher up into the woods. The sky was clear and beautiful, the stars serene and steady above him. He stood with his back against a tree and screamed. He screamed obscenities and profundities, the name Jesarian, and then the names of the stars, one by one, shouting them out as they all came back to him, more and more. Latin and Greek titles, stars named after the girlfriends of astronomers (one named for a cartoonist, one for a prostitute), stars given only a classification and a number. He could find them all.

He had to stop long before he'd named them all. He was cold and tired and giddy, and his voice was fading. He staggered down to the car again, sat for half an hour then, being too far

from home, went looking for the nearest town and a cheap hotel. It was late, but he rang up the school to leave a message saying he was sick and might be taking the next few days off. He sounded sick when he talked, thanks to all that shouting and the feverish tilt to his words.

He went to bed, trying not to think about anything. "Jesarian," he whispered, before falling into sleep.

It was only in the morning, as he was sitting in the car with a lukewarm coffee and a reassuringly normal set of headlines (no terrorist attacks today, thank you), that Tony wondered where the vehicle had come from. He vaguely remembered Robin saying something about it, and he realized with a sick inevitability that it must have belonged to Robin and Helen's parents. His wallet was thicker than he remembered too, but that couldn't be right. Had he sold his soul for a star catalog and pocket money?

He went back into the hotel and paid for another day's accommodation. As he got back into bed, he moved to get the weight off his injured arm—except he realized it didn't seem that bad. After Jesarian's painful strike, it had subsided almost completely.

Jesarian was the name of the thing inside Helen Johnson. It was a demon, or near enough to a demon as Tony understood the term to make no difference. He tried to work out what he felt, whether he should be feeling some sort of awe or primal dread. Tried to work out if the line about selling his soul was more than cheap melodrama. He had recently watched a special on Islam, and it had described the soul as a white bird that would nest beneath the throne of Allah. Was that him, a white bird now singed and falling? As a scientist, he understood that religion was all metaphor, and all metaphors broke down. Was Jesarian like a demon? Did it matter?

Whatever he was supposed to be feeling, it was eclipsed by waves of fatigue and stupidity.

He was stupid for trying to barge in on Robin's life with no real training or plan; stupid for believing that what he had found there was demonic; stupid for not doing something about it.

But what had he been supposed to do? He'd been trying to protect Robin. Even in those panicked moments in the house on Rochester, he had almost reflexively moved to protect the memory of his wife from being corrupted by that thing that claimed to be madness—better to sell his soul for nothing than for the hope of Dian. It all still seemed to make sense—it was important and proper.

And what was he supposed to do now? The awe and the dread were within him, but in the cold light of a cheap hotel room, they lay passive. When they rose, he knew that he would do things that he could not help, could not explain. He didn't want to do anything.

And maybe I'm overanalyzing the whole fucking thing, he thought miserably. "That's the trouble with this country today, my sociopathic pupils," he said to the empty room, with a mock scholarly crispness. "Too much analysis, too little action. Amen."

Then he just felt stupid again, so he continued lying in bed, staring at the wall.

COMPARING NOTES

He was back at school on Thursday, a mere sixty hours after the confrontation with Jesarian that had turned into abject surrender. He didn't really plan it, but he was home when Judith from the principal's office rang on Wednesday night, and he cautiously said he should be in.

He was still driving the Johnsons' car. It wasn't like anyone would have reported it stolen, and it was a hell of a lot easier than the alternatives. He realized that he'd gotten to the stage where a car here or there was the least of his worries.

He saw Robin Johnson hanging around in the main quadrangle before the day started, looking distracted and lost as usual. When he saw Tony coming toward him, he smiled wanly, seemingly half in welcome, half in pity. *Overanalysis*, Tony reminded himself sharply. *Get over it.*

"Hey, Mr. Spruce, heard you were sick."

"Yes, thanks Robin. I was, but it wasn't anything serious."

Nobody was around them.

"She's gone," Robin said.

Tony blinked at him. "Gone where?"

The boy shrugged. "Doing stuff, I guess."

"Do you feel any better?"

"No. What about you?"

"Not really. Do you have anyone else to stay with? Relatives or something?"

"No."

The crowd of the quadrangle swirled back toward them in one of its strange chaotic cycles. "Well, I better go, see you in class."

"Yeah sure," said Robin, and Tony went up to the staff room.

His first class that morning was a younger one than Robin's, a practical subject, which meant that they were all in a lab, heating chemicals in test-tubes to make them change color. What the colors had to do with electron valences was anybody's guess. He stood before them, looking blankly down at the scribbled notes left for him by the substitute teacher.

"OK, ah, read through page 197 of the text book, paying attention to diagram, ah, 11-4. Count how many electrons there are in each of the rings, and work out what they're going to do when they gain energy. Any questions?"

Of course there weren't.

He wanted to say, "Satan is after your soul, kids. He's going to mix it in a beaker and make pretty colors." He wondered how they would react. He didn't say it, though. He thought he'd better sit down and read the textbook himself to see what the rest of the lesson was going to be about.

He got through to lunch all right and mingled happily enough with the other teachers. Like the students, they had their own little cliques and internal currents of gossip, malicious or otherwise. Tony said all the right things, as far as he could tell, and he steered questions about his health off in the direction of weird weather patterns. That was a subject that could keep pretty much anybody on the planet occupied these days, it seemed.

The worst moment came at the end of lunch, when he was hurrying toward class (in the proper, dignified hurry of the teacher's profession, of course). He glanced out a window toward the car park and saw Keith Pendrick staring balefully at something. What he was staring at was, of course, the Johnsons' car.

Oh fuck, thought Tony, *here it comes.*

He continued to class, then stood in the room in a dither of uncertainty, waiting. *I should get away, he thought. Find Jesarian. Where is she? What does she want me to do?*

The door remained steadfastly shut.

A boy put up his hand. "We had to do glaciers again. We told the teacher we'd done that, but she said we could 'practice' some more." A thin, unmotivated wave of agreement spread through the room. Ah, that was this class, he remembered — Geography of Lonely Places. One of those weird subjects that people complained were non-traditional, but which he always liked.

"Okay, okay, no glaciers, and let's forget about deserts for the moment. Let's do star systems — you can't get much lonelier than that. What do you think?"

The boy looked surprised by the question, then shrugged. "Yeah, sounds all right," he said. Tony was already scribbling a diagram on the board.

† † †

He went around to Robin's place after school. He had to, just to see. Even from the outside, the absence of Jesarian was like a hole in the wall, through which a cold wind blew.

"She was gone on Tuesday morning," Robin said, when he finally arrived (since he was still constrained to public transport). "She didn't say anything."

"Are you going to be all right here?" Tony asked him.

"Yeah, sure."

"You haven't seen Pendrick recently, the counselor? He hasn't been hanging around the house or anything, has he?"

"No, why?"

"I don't trust him. He did come 'round before, didn't he?"

Robin shook his head. "I'll look out for him. Do you want to go out for a pizza or something?"

Tony thought about his lonely bachelor's dinner waiting at home. "I better not. People might see us."

Robin shrugged, and a pause stretched out between them. "But you'll ring if she comes back, won't you?" Tony eventually continued.

"At least you got a choice," the boy said, in a half-spiteful whisper.

Tony digested this. "Yeah, I guess. But—"

"She *did* this to me. She was *playing* with me, experimenting, trying to remember. She was just Helen, but she didn't remember." His face was contorting, tears wanting to flow. Half angry, half terribly sad. He pulled fitfully at his shirt, or rather the scars beneath it.

Tony stepped forward to comfort him again.

"Oh, get stuffed."

Tony stopped. He wasn't trained for this; he didn't know how to help. He just waited.

"I'm sorry. I'll be all right. You should probably go if you're going."

Eventually, awkwardly, he did.

The little light on his answering machine was flashing — no surprises there. Tony decided to wait until after dinner before facing whomever it was. *Or whatever*, he thought with false humor. (And then he had to force himself away from the machine, to fight the urge to check if Jesarian had called.) He grabbed the spare ribs and Coke he had picked up on the way home and went up to his bedroom. The window wasn't large, but if you opened the blinds properly, and sat on the floor with your back against the bed, you avoided the street lamps and had a pretty good view of the night sky.

There weren't a lot of stars visible, but Tony found he didn't mind. He could map them anyway, correlate all the strange bits of information he'd picked up over the years to make something far grander. It was not complete, of course. Human science might have labeled almost every speck of light visible in the sky, and many more that were not visible, but he had read only a fraction of that work. He'd picked up a book from the school library this afternoon that had a more comprehensive overview of astronomy than he'd read in a while. He'd also ordered two different star atlases from an online bookshop.

When he got up to take a piss, he saw with surprise that it was past 11:30. The ribs had all gone, but the book he'd borrowed was still lying unopened on the bed.

Just read the first chapter, he figured, grabbing it and sitting back down on the floor beside the bed, glancing up at the darkness through the window. *Through a glass darkly,* he

thought. *And what the hell is that supposed to mean anyway?* Then he thought again of the patterns of the stars, and that was enough.

LESSONS LEARNED

"Okay, Mr. Johnson, tell us what happens when a sun burns out without the mass to form a neutron star."

Robin looked up at Tony, startled. "Ah, a white dwarf," he ventured.

"That's right. Everybody have a look on page 77." Everybody did.

Tony grinned at the boy and received a strengthening smile in return. Robin looked good, calmer and somehow stronger. Then Tony got back to the lesson.

A few days later, Tony and Keith Pendrick found themselves unexpectedly alone in the staff-room.

"Hey," Tony said, noncommittally. Word was that the counselor had saved a student from jumping off a seven-story building over the weekend. (Apparently the girl had rung him up on her mobile, whilst on the edge.) Knowing Pendrick, Tony wasn't sure he believed that. Still, he had a little more respect for the position, what with the trauma it involved.

Pendrick nodded in return, looking wary.

"I understand," Tony said, hurriedly. "It was like the scariest thing in the world, but I think it's going to be all right."

"What are you talking about?" The wariness deepened.

"Helen. The girl on Rochester Street. The... demon." There, he'd finally said it.

"Okay, Spruce. Whatever."

Tony blinked at him. "You do know what I'm talking about, don't you?"

"I have to go."

Pendrick was hurrying out. He didn't seem scared or greatly surprised. He certainly didn't look like someone fleeing from the memory of Jesarian. "I understand," Tony called after him. Except he didn't.

A comet moved above him. It was invisible to the naked eye, but its passage was as inevitable as it had been for eons uncounted (the astronomy journals were doing pretty well, but he did not trust their estimates of time). Comets presaged disaster, traditionally speaking. Of course, if that was the case, there were thousands of such disasters, circling patiently. He could point out Halley's if he was called upon to do so, though its tail was now a dull and minuscule thing.

He could no longer tell where his sense of the cosmos and his reading of trajectory data from the web began, ended or overlapped. They were one and the same. Beyond the solar system, things got complicated. Constellations were not merely pretty patterns in the sky, though indeed the distance between their individual stars was vast. The Southern Cross was a symbol. The False Cross – often mistaken for it, although it was



darker and incomplete – was another. Nearby was Centaurus, brightest constellation in the Southern sky. Symbols of what?

Things were happening within the heavens, strange shifts of precedence. It was like the dizzying feeling he had experienced upon seeing the scars and the windshield. (His mind balked at that, as if trying to remember something. It quickly returned to the heavens.) The patterns that seemed to move but did not.

Somehow, Tony thought, it was the void between the stars that was shifting. The vast reaches of space. The abyss. Perhaps once it had been the stars that moved, really and truly. He thought he could see it, how it could happen, the wonder of it.

Those stars glittered coldly now, surrounded by their chunks of dead matter and frozen dreams, but they might awaken still. Metaphor and magic and the precision of physics. And all of it really about what was happening down here, on this overcrowded rock.

Tony sat in his bedroom, gazing beyond his ceiling, enraptured, lost in it.

CAUSE AND EFFECT

He had the cover of darkness, and Tony moved quietly around the side of the house. Lights streamed out of windows near the back, and shadows shifted against the glass. He'd bought a pair of binoculars, but in the end there wasn't a good angle from which to use them.

Keith Pendrick was eating dinner with a woman, perhaps a decade older. She seemed to be reading something to him from this morning's newspaper, and he was laughing.

He is an enemy of Jesarian, Tony reminded himself. *It is the only explanation.*

He waited through dinner and the washing up. He had to shift when the two went into the living room to watch something on a big TV. Tony didn't learn much, except that they kept as few lights on as possible. He suspected that that meant they were keen on energy conservation.

The stars shone softly down, reassuring him but offering no instructions. This had seemed so right – proactive action. Something that would make Jesarian proud.

By balancing precariously on a garden chair, he got enough height to see what was really happening. Pendrick seemed to be navigating through a series of strange menus on a *Harry Potter* DVD.

Or maybe Pendrick's just an oblivious fool.

Defeated, Tony went home again.

† † †

It was a cold morning. The summer was long but now turning to autumn, and a dusty wind had blown from the west as Tony had driven to work. He could still hear it now, rattling the windows of the old building. The school was in a state of shameful repair – all but the new

gym with its sponsor's name painted gaudily on the courts and the uniforms, and on a big sign outside for all to see. That's what the wind meant to Tony, that and the momentum of photons moving through the void.

Colleen Douglas was demonstrating her 3-D model of chemical interaction. It didn't have moving electrons like some of the others, but everything was color-coded and she showed it off with pride. Tony was thanking her when the knock came on the door. It was Judith, asking him to accompany her to the principal's office.

"Sure," he said after a beat. "I'll just fix up some stuff."

The woman watched him impassively as he gave one of the students handouts to distribute and delivered concise instructions on what they were to do until he got back.

"This isn't about the science projects, is it?"

"I don't know."

"They've been very popular."

"I don't know."

Tony got the feeling somebody was following them maybe thirty feet behind. He resisted the urge to turn to see. Probably only some kid (with a light and purposeful step). The corridors all echoed strangely anyway, and there was still the wind.

The principal's office was at the end of one wing. Not very central, but good for the winter sun. The corridor seemed very long, and they had not finished walking it when Pendrick emerged from a doorway beside them, an unreadable expression on his face.

Tony turned then, and people suddenly seemed to be everywhere. Pendrick, a woman coming down toward them (*must be a parent*, he thought), a man coming from a different doorway. Another parent?

"Tony," said a voice from behind him, and he kept turning, feeling dizzy, to see Principal Donovan-Smith standing at his door. He was looking at Pendrick with dislike.

"Time's up," said Pendrick.

Tony was confused. He kept turning, wondering who all these people were. Judith took a hurried step away.

The hand of the woman who had followed them drifted closer to her bag. The man from the opposite doorway to Pendrick's stared at him with cold eyes, naked with contempt.

"Okay, Sunshine, hands behind your back," the woman said. She handcuffed him and started listing the charges.

"Do you understand the charges as they have been detailed to you?"

"No," said Tony.

"You fucked up, Spruce," said the man with cold eyes. "Kid tried to hang himself last night, and it's all coming tumbling down."

"But I didn't r- r—" He couldn't say it, he just couldn't. "Murder?"

"Tony, please," said the principal, looking acutely uncomfortable.

They were closing in on him again. There were four police officers, two uniformed, two in plain clothes. Pendrick was behind them, his stare heavy. The room was too crowded, and then he saw Jesarian's eyes again, the infinite reaches of them.

Tony swung his cuffed hands sideways, scattering papers from Donovan-Smith's desk into the air, as he brought his foot down hard on female cop's shoes. He dove sideways, driving his shoulder toward one of the uniforms, feeling it twist out of his way, and then everyone was shouting and there was paper flying everywhere and he saw the doorway, vacated by Pendrick.

The female cop grabbed Tony's arm, twisted and kneed him smartly in the groin. As he folded, someone hit him across the back of the shoulders with a truncheon that had appeared as if from nowhere, and another kicked him casually across the face.

He tried to call out, but the darkness swallowed him first.

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Words. They didn't make any sense. He was in a moving vehicle of some kind. The floor was cold against the heat of his pain.

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Figures bending over him. Then—

"Ah, just cut his throat. It'd serve the bitch right."

"What bitch?" screamed Tony. Thrashing his legs sideways against unyielding metal. "What bitch, what bitch? Say that again. *Bowbefore her.*"

"Bow-wow, puppy," said the voice.

Tony snarled upward, trying to make him out. It was the plainclothes policeman, his voice as cold as his eyes. The man smiled, flexing his fingers over Tony's face, showing off the ring he wore — a heavy looking stone with jagged edges. Then he balled the hand into a fist, and brought it down hard.

UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

"I heard you caused some commotion earlier," said Mr. Viney, who was Tony's publicly appointed defender.

"I didn't do anything," said Tony, sullenly.

"Now, Mr. Spruce, I advise you not to make such broad statements. Let's instead try to work out what's what, yes? As far as I can tell, this is pretty shaky evidence they've got here. It looks bad, of course, but shaky. If you can keep out of further trouble, yes," Viney looked at him reproachfully, "you'll be here twenty-four hours at most."

They were in a little room in the police station. His body ached all over, and the flutter of panic had calmed but not gone away, yet the pain was only a memory. He had no cuts, not even

any bruises. He'd been in a room with a mirrored wall (so they did exist), and he looked disheveled but healthy. He didn't understand it.

"Let's see. You've been brought in under suspicion of statutory rape, various miscellaneous offenses relating to financial transactions and, most specifically, the murder of Amos, Wendy and Helen Johnson. No, ah, bodies have been found. I'm sure that will be the focus of further police questioning. That's what they want you for, anyway. Even the rape charges are going to come down to dates, since the boy is now above the age of consent, and that'll get messy. They'll use everything else as an inroad to homicide. They may not even make it to the courtroom. Illicit affair turned nasty, that sort of thing." Tony nodded, still trying to digest it beyond the terms rape and murder. "So," Viney continued. "Did you do it?"

"Are you even allowed to ask me that?"

The lawyer rolled his eyes.

"No, no. I did not kill anybody. I know Robin, of course, but I have never... slept with him. He won't claim any different."

Viney started to interrupt, but Tony pressed on. "I didn't even know that the other Johnsons were dead. As far as anyone can tell, they have simply disappeared. I was just trying to help Robin out."

Viney raised his eyes at that. "As a teacher, you would be well aware of the proper channels—"

"Damn right. Ask Pendrick; see how far those proper channels got."

"Pendrick?"

"The school counselor. Keith Pendrick."

Viney stared at him, as if trying to judge the truth of this (or, at least, its credibility). He started flipping through his notes, muttering to himself. "Okay, this is good. We can do something with this," he said eventually.

"What about Robin? Is he all right?" Tony asked.

"I'm told his condition has stabilized."

"He tried to kill himself?"

"Yes, one of the prostitutes found him, apparently."

"What prostitutes?"

"The, um... You have to be aware of the prostitutes."

"I don't know what the fuck is going on. You tell me about the prostitutes." He was starting to feel better now. More in control of himself, if not the mess. The whole thing was just the normal chaotic state of affairs his whole life had taken since he had met Jesarian — but he could actually use that to his advantage. This was like a test, and he would get through it.

"Phone records, credit records and initial interviews with witnesses indicate he had visits from prostitutes on a daily basis for twenty-five days. You don't know about that? Or the drugs?"

Tony shook his head.

"Okay, okay, this is good. Depending on what this Pendrick guy has to say, of course. But what about the phone conversations? And what about the transfer of funds from the Johnsons' bank account for settlement of payment for a motor accident you were involved with?"

"What accident?" said Tony, genuinely puzzled. His control was slipping again, maybe had never been there to begin with. "What conversations?"

"Half an hour a night, give or take, his house to yours."

"I don't answer the phone. The answering machine takes it."

Viney sighed. "Look, this is all trivial stuff. Not really, but they're trying to get you for murder, like I said. They need motive, opportunity and bodies. The evidence trail is already muddy, so let's sort this out. You can survive this one, Tony. Trust me. What did Robin Johnson say to you for half an hour a night, every night?"

"I told you I never took his calls."

"And why don't you answer the phone?"

"Because the sky talks to me."

SIREN SONG

January 15-

The first few weeks after the evening on the beach were strange. In fact, they were probably the worst and best weeks of my life. There were times when I was away from Jenny when I had problems believing that it had actually happened. In the cold light of day, walking to work or having a shower in the flat, it all seemed a little implausible. However, whenever I grew too doubtful of the experience, I could feel her presence at the back of my mind, comforting and warming me. It was particularly noticeable when I woke up each morning. It was a rare day that she wasn't the first thing I thought of as I crawled back to wakefulness.

I didn't know whether to be excited or terrified much of the time. I didn't say anything to Jenny on the drive home. I was in shock, I think. My mind couldn't comprehend what had happened. I thought of her as soon as I woke up the following morning, and I lay there not knowing what to think. She wasn't human, somehow. She had powers, of some sort, something that I didn't understand and perhaps couldn't understand. I was excited and terrified all at once. Part of me wanted to run and hide, to pretend that Jenny didn't exist and to go back to my old life. That feeling of her at the back of my mind made it plain what a false hope that was.

Eventually, I found the courage to go and confront her, to ask her what had happened, what she'd done to me. What she said didn't make much sense.

"I've just released the potential within you, Linda," she said, a look of amused concern on her face.

"What are you?" I asked her.

"Your friend," she replied. "Your benefactor." I'm sure she knew that that wasn't the answer I was looking for, but she always managed to evade the question somehow. Controlling a conversation with Jenny is impossible. I don't know if her answer was meant to reassure me, but it didn't work. It just made me more scared. Who could I go to, though? Who could I ask for help? I made some sort of deal, one I didn't really understand, with some form of supernatural creature, and I had no way of understanding it or escaping it, apart from continuing to hang around with her.

I think she knew that, too.

POWER

January 16-

The one thing that made it very plain to me that my life changed after Jenny's gift was what happened at work. Remember my boss, Nigel? Well, I've got him eating out of my hand now. I've heard the phrase "managing upwards" used once or twice in the external training courses the company occasionally decides to send us on, and that's exactly what I'm doing now. He may be the boss in name, but I'm actually in control of the department. Nigel's quite a sad little man, really. You see, for all his bossiness and aggression, all he wants is to be mothered. His wife, I gather, is a pretty miserable, mousy type whom he bosses around, but deep inside, he longs to be told what to do. He wants the rules he had as a kid. So, I gave him those rules.

Even better, though, is the influence I'm gaining over the managing director. Nigel, as financial director, normally reports direct to Peter, who is the MD. I "persuaded" Nigel that maybe I should be doing the reporting now, and he agreed with very little persuasion. Who's Mummu's good little boy, then? Peter's a whole different kettle of fish. He's a very driven man, sharply dressed, married (twice) with a couple of kids. Oh, and a libido the size of Italy. It's been common knowledge round the office that he's had more than one liaison with some of the more attractive girls in sales. You might call him a serial lecher, but never to his face. I've never been much interest to Peter. Dowdy girl in accounts, married and knocking on the door of middle age? Please. He has younger, slimmer and denser fish to fry.

Well, thanks to Jenny, I've changed all that. Peter's almost as simple as Nigel. He just wants to be desired. It reaffirms his male ego, you see. You make him feel like the alpha male, and he'll do whatever you want him to. Well, OK, that's not

strictly true. You can manipulate him into making the decisions you want him to, though, and that's more than enough for me.

I experimented with my control a little, initially horrified and then delighted by what I could do, by getting him and Nigel to approve a new windows-based accounting system instead of the old DOS monstrosity we've been fighting with for years. It took less than a week. We've been pushing for it for two years. I've been slowly "adjusting" the way the company operates through the two of them over the last few months. It's made my life so much easier. The substantial pay rise was nice, too.

The women in the office have been slightly harder work. I've learnt some harsh lessons. The first is that, if you're going to manipulate men using your sexuality, don't do it in front of other women - or if you have to, make sure they're complicit in the process. I suppose giving other women what they want in a friend and co-worker is a more subtle process. Men are simple creatures, but women aren't. Although I haven't really discussed this with Jenny, she's proved my guide. The sister-and-confidante way she worked me works with others too. Another few weeks of this, and I'll be ruling the roost at this place, no problem.

And yes, I realise that Jenny worked me, just the way that I'm working the people in my office. And no, it doesn't make me any more comfortable. But what am I meant to do? I can run away from her physically, but I can't run away from the part of her that's in my head. More to the point, I'm not sure I want to. I'm enjoying what I'm doing here at work. Yes, I'm afraid of Jenny but I want to be with her, too, and I can't deny that what she's given me has done me the world of good.

DEMANDS AND DESIRES

January 17

The other worrying thing about what's happened to me is that I'm seeing even more of Jenny than I was before, but our relationship has changed. "You're really important to me now, sister," she said once. "More important than you realise. You need some looking after."

What's more, I've met someone who I suspect might be like Jenny. There's this guy Karl whom she sees a lot of. At first I thought he was her boyfriend, but it seems to be more complicated than that. The two of them are up to something. They've been working together on some sort of project, but Jenny hasn't filled me in on the details. She's told me that it's important and that what they're doing is for the good of ordinary people as much as themselves. That's about as close as I've got to an admission from her that she's something more than ordinary.

That's the good side. You want the bad? Well, I was beginning to get a sense of what Jenny meant when she told me that she would need something from me in return for the gifts she gave me. It seems that amongst certain people she was a known face, and that if she needed them manipulated, she needed somebody else to do the job for her. That meant me. I didn't want to do it, but I found myself doing it anyway. I found myself on a few dates with guys I wouldn't have touched with a bargepole, or posing as a businesswoman, getting information or manipulating decisions for Jenny.

Despite myself, I was getting pretty darn good at it too. There's a surprising sense of satisfaction in seeing a guy focus on you instead of all the younger, prettier things around you. A few people started described me as "silver-tongued" which I took as a great compliment. Perhaps it's something you can only learn as you get older: Sometimes the most attractive thing about you really is your personality.

Heck, there's even a satisfaction in making women open up to you quickly and easily. I've never been particularly fast to make friends and was always a bit of a loner at school. Being someone women felt they could confide in was great. Yeah, I felt some pangs of guilt at betraying their secrets to Jenny and Karl sometimes, but never for long. This was Jenny after all. She didn't allow me too many doubts. Every time I asked her for details of what she and Karl were up to, she avoided the question and suddenly I feel that it didn't matter. I guess she was doing something to my head, but I didn't realise it at the time. maybe I didn't want to realise it because I was enjoying my new-found control a little too much,

As the weeks passed, I did start to miss the simplicity of the relationship Jenny and I used to have. We used to be best friends and now we were like employer and employee. I didn't dare confront her about it, but every time I was getting a little down about it, she'd just call up and arrange for another meal out. Somehow, despite my fear and confusion, despite the fact that she wouldn't tell me anything about herself, she could always talk me round. Even though I realised intellectually that she was only doing to me what she had me doing to others, I still couldn't stop her. I was hers, whether I liked it or not.

SLIPPERY SLOPE

January 18

You know, one thing that really continues to worry me about the new insight and ability to charm people that Jenny gave me is that it gets harder and harder to stop using it. Soon I was

turning it on my friends as well. I'd been neglecting them for months. The dinner party at the Dennys was the one exception. I found myself increasingly at a loose end. whatever it was that Jenny and Karl were up to, it was keeping them too busy to allow them to spend time with me, apart from when they needed something from me.

So, I thought I'd give some old pals a ring and get together for dinner with a few of them, but this time on my terms. It didn't go well. Several of them came up with all sorts of excuses for not coming, and when we did have dinner, it wasn't exactly the good time I'd been expecting. You see, my old girlfriends are pretty twitchy about me talking to their husbands now, just as I used to be about single women near Brian. I could see what they were thinking even without using my gift. A lone woman, suddenly doling herself up much more was no longer an ally, but a threat. For goodness' sake, I could twist my co-workers and random strangers around my fingers, but my oldest friends were proving to be a real problem. Well, there was a challenge for me.

I told Nigel that I needed a few days off, and I got to work.

It was pretty simple really. I started with the housewives, those few of them left in this day and age. I dressed down for them, more like the way I used to dress, and played it all meek and mild. The problem is that my ability to "read" people seems to work less well on people who know me well. It's as if their attitudes towards me are more complex and it takes time to understand it. Well, I was prepared to put in that time.

After a week of shopping trips, coffee and lunches, I was getting more and more angry. Those cows had some really twisted wants from me. You see, most of them liked me in my old beaten down, betrayed wife incarnation. They didn't like the new, assertive, confident me. Why? Because the old me made them feel better about themselves and their own marriages. A few of them, Lizzie and Allie in particular, were cool about it and actually encouraged me in my new life, which was good. But then, they seemed to have pretty stable, under-control marriages.

Now Catriona had a marriage that was on the brink, just as Jenny had pointed out a couple of months ago. Oh, Cati loved her husband for the wealth and comfort he brought her, there was no doubt about that, and she looked down on me for being a divorcee. She made this great play of paying for our lunch that day in one of the department stores in London as "things must be so much harder now you're on your own." Little did she know. She didn't really love David anymore, though.

The relationship sounded eerily familiar from the latter days of my marriage. It was a cold,



habitual thing. She'd lost David not to another woman but to the job that maintained her lifestyle. She knew something was wrong in the relationship and she was concerned about it, but not enough to actually do something. No, she just really wanted to feel sorry for me instead, because that would make her feel better about her own life. Fair enough. I was the most pitiable wreck of a deserted wife you could imagine when we met that afternoon. We chatted about what she was up to and how she was spending her time. When I heard about the pottery evening class she attended every Thursday night, I knew I had my chance.

Cati's husband was doing pretty well for himself as the Porsche in the driveway proved. I found myself thinking that it was one of the cheaper models as I made my way up to the house. Spending time with Jenny does raise your expectations a little. That thought made me pause for a moment. I'd never really considered it before. Where did she get all her money? I shook the idea from my head.

I'd dressed to kill, obviously. A little black number that Jenny had helped me choose. Not too little. I am in my 40s, and there are some things that I just can't carry off anymore. In fact, I imagine that Catil still has the edge on me in looks, thanks to the expensive gym membership she has, but I'd be prepared to put a lot of money on the fact that she hadn't dressed up for David in a long, long time. That's what happens when you start taking people for granted. Well, Catil, you shouldn't have taken your husband or me for granted. We can both surprise you.

I certainly surprised him. He was still in his suit when I turned up at the door. His shirt was rumpled and his tie loose. Darn it, he looked handsome. This was going to be easier than I thought. I opened my mind through the chant that Jenny taught me and started reading the emotions within. Oh, he was hungry for touch and closeness all right. As long as I didn't overplay my hand this time, he would be a pushover. I felt good. I was doing something to redress the balance against those who take their partners for granted. This would be fun.

I asked for Catil. He said she was out, but invited me in anyway. We chatted, and I flirted with him in a low-key way. In the end, I said that I'd better go and gave him a close hug goodbye. I could feel him... respond as I did so. This was working so well. It was working so well, in fact, that I didn't even stop to question my motives for doing it.

MAKING MISTAKES

January 21-

Jenny came back a couple of days later, so I didn't have much chance to pursue things further with David, and that might have been for the best.

If he had plenty of time to develop fond memories of my little visit, I'm sure he would be that much more eager the next time. Jenny, on the other hand, was angry in a way that I'd never seen her before. Obviously whatever she had been doing had gone wrong and badly so. I don't think I've ever been more frightened in my life. Anger seems like an inadequate word to describe the rage that was boiling through her. I wanted to flee from her presence there and then, but I was too afraid to do so.

Jenny hadn't even bothered to greet me properly. She just called me up and demanded that I get over to her apartment. It didn't look good when I got there. For a start, she wasn't answering the door. I let myself in with the spare key she'd given me and looked around in horror. She'd smashed up most of the furniture in the living room. She was obviously stronger than she looked. Then I noticed what looked like traces of blood across the floor. I went cold. For a moment I felt utterly frozen. Then I heard her calling my name.

She was in the bath, sulking. She often took to the bath when she was pissed off, saying that it made her feel slightly better.

"Are you OK?" I asked, cautiously.

"Oh, I'm all better now. You should see the other guy," she replied with a nasty undertone in her voice. "I need something from you."

"Jenny, you know I'll give you anything you want."

"Well, this isn't yours to give. I need money, and I need it fast. I've got other things to be doing, so I need you to fix it," she snapped. This was not like her at all. "You've got that boss of yours eating out of your hands by now, right?"

"How did you know that?" I asked. I hadn't talked about Nigel with her of late.

"Oh, I keep better tabs on you than you realise, my dear Linda. Now, I need a flat million transferred into my account by tomorrow evening by direct bank transfer. I don't care how you do it, just get the money from your company's cash reserves into my account. The firm's got enough, hasn't it?"

I nodded dumbly. It did, no doubt about that. The MD was always pretty careful about these sorts of things. He felt that a good cash pile kept you insulated from downturns and the FD had never had the spine to argue with him. But stealing money... I wasn't sure about that.

Jenny must have sensed my doubt, because she signed, climbed out of the bath and wrapped a towel around herself.

"Come here, Linda," she said, drawing me into an embrace. "I know that this is a pretty big thing I'm asking you for, but it's important. Really important. Karl and I are losing. We're facing off against something so nasty that I couldn't even

begin to describe it to you and, well, it's beating us. It has support, something backing it, and I'm not quite sure what it is. We need allies and resources. All you need to know is that I need the money tomorrow night, and I'll have it back to you by the end of the week. Now, do you think you can pull that off?"

I was terrified, I'll admit, both of her and of being caught. But like I said earlier, this was Jenny. Did I really have a choice?

"Well, Peter's away. That just leaves Nigel to deal with. Yeah, I should be able to manage that," I said. "I'll ring you tomorrow if there are going to be any problems."

Jenny squeezed me. "I knew you'd come through for me, Linda. That's great news. Look, this is more than I've ever asked of you before. Can I offer you something in return? I could give you another gift, like the ones I've already given you, in return for this increased service to me."

I couldn't believe it. Part of me rebelled at the very thought. She was asking me to risk imprisonment for her, for a fight I didn't understand, and she wouldn't explain. And yet, using her gifts had been so rewarding. I thought of the way my job had changed, about the look and feel of David as he really noticed me for the first time. maybe... At first my mind sprang back to my desire to have kids, but then I decided against it. Yeah, maybe a year ago I had desired nothing more, but now things were different. I wanted something for myself. What I asked for surprised even me.

"I want to be able to make them feel what I felt. I want to be able to shock people out of their own self-interested little worlds. I want people to be able to understand what it's like to have someone cheat on you."

Jenny positively beamed at me.

"Done."

As I sat in her car, on the way out into the country and a river that seemed to be very special to Jenny to seal the pact, I knew what it was to be at war with yourself. Part of me wanted to feel the water again, to have this new gift and to become part of this world that I glimpsed through Jenny. Another part of me, the part that had been married to Brian, which still longed for children and a normal married life, despaired. That was the part of me that trapped me in a loveless marriage for a decade longer than I should have been there, so I ignored it. It may well have been the worst mistake of my life. Even as the river rose to embrace me, part of me worried about what was happening. I never quite felt safe in the water's embrace this time. I began to suspect that I would never feel safe again.

FALL

January 23-

Nigel almost never takes time off. maybe his wife is glad of the break, or maybe she's doing something more interesting the rest of the time. None of us have ever met her, so I'd never had the chance to find out. I swung by work on the way home from Jenny's place and pulled Nigel's address from the payroll files. I then left a message on his voicemail saying that I would be in late due to a doctor's appointment. As I put the phone down, I wondered why I'd bothered. I didn't really need to explain myself to Nigel anymore.

The following morning, I arrived at Nigel's place just after he left for work. Always punctual, my Nigel makes life so much easier.

I sat in the car for a while, concentrating on all the pain, misery and humiliation I'd been through when Brian left me. I had to stop myself crying by reminding myself just what I was doing there. When I had myself back under control, I got out of the car and rang the doorbell. The moment Nigel's wife opened the door, I let her have it with both barrels. Every bit of pain and humiliation I'd felt in the last 18 months, in one concentrated blast. It didn't kick in full force straight away, but I could see tears welling up in the woman's eyes.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Wrong house. I thought this was St. Mary's Close."

"no... no, that's three streets up."

"Sorry to bother you."

It took until early afternoon before he got the call. Nigel looked perplexed, then briefly angry, then genuinely worried.

"Linda, I'm going to have to take the afternoon off. I've notified the bank that you'll be authorising transactions until I get back in the morning, since Peter's away."

"no problem, Nigel. Everything OK?"

"I don't know, really. Something's up with my wife."

"You'd better get back then. Drive carefully, and give me a ring in the morning."

"I will. Thanks, Linda. You're very kind."

If only he knew. She'd be an emotional wreck for at least a week and confused for a while after that. That should give me plenty of time to sort things out for Jenny. As Nigel's deputy, I was cosignatory on the accounts along with him and Peter. I now had full access to the company's cash reserves until the pair of them arrived. Bingo. Even if either of them looked too deeply I should be able to distract them. I was home free.

THE GOOD SOLDIER

The next day I jogged through City Park in the rain. The crutches were sticking out of a dumpster in back of the boarding house. I was born again.

To say my recovery caused a stir was a major understatement. My doctors at the VA poked and probed me, trying to figure out what happened. I overheard one of them say my sudden recovery was a miracle. If only they knew.

My family was both stunned and happy at my recovery. Only a few weeks before, they were trying to convince me to move back home so they could spend more time with me. What a joke. They thought I'd never be able to live independently again.

Still, I sometimes wonder if I made a mistake by revealing my recovery. When I talked about it, I didn't mention Jim or the arrangement we made. He never said I should keep it a secret. Besides, wasn't like anyone, even the campus preachers on the Pentacrest lawn, would ever believe me. Which is for the best, because if they did believe, they'd claim I'd sold my soul to the Devil.

Screw 'em. What did their God ever do for me? They want to say I sold out for something cheap, so be it! I tried to rationalize my decision at first, but you know what? It all boiled down to this: I couldn't stand to be trapped inside my own body. I wasn't some disability rights activist who wanted the world to accept my disability. Screw the ramps. I wanted a body that could run up the stairs. I wanted a body that could jump off a bridge into the Iowa River. I wanted to be able to make a difference.

Until I met Jim, I thought I loved God. I thought that my injury was some kind of test. But when Jim offered me the chance to walk, how could I refuse? What kind of God would consider it a sin to accept someone's help?

I didn't see Jim for a long time after that night. After I'd pulled the braces from my legs he told me that one day he would call on me for help, but until then I was free to do whatever I wanted. He suggested I get in shape. I told him that wouldn't be a problem.

Once I made my miraculous recovery, I stopped going over to Pete's. It reminded me of a past that was dead and gone. I found another place downtown, a sports bar called the Eight Ball, and I actually started playing pool again. I was drinking less and meeting more people. I didn't feel so isolated anymore, or self-conscious about people's stares. At the Eight Ball I was one of the guys again. Just a face in the crowd. Who knew it would feel so good?

Days turned to weeks, and weeks became months, and still I'd heard nothing from Jim. Part of me started

to wonder if the day might never come when he'd call me to action. Believe it or not, I was kind of disappointed. He'd given me my life back; I wanted to repay him.

In the meantime, I got a job. It was tougher than I imagined, what with the economy and all, but my service record (what little of it there was) landed me a job as a security guard at one of the local plants. The best part was that I had enough money to leave that rat hole boarding house behind and get a real apartment out in the 'burbs. I even started visiting the folks every couple of weeks or so, and surprisingly, things were good. We'd sit and have dinner, laugh and talk. It was great. I felt like a human being again. I didn't even think about Jim much at all before long.

Summer came and went. I got a promotion at work and went on a few dates. Dad had started asking whether I wanted to go to college, and it was actually starting to sound tempting. And then it happened.

REALITY CHECK

It was in early September, and I had gone downtown early one afternoon. Thought I'd go to Old Capitol Mall and get some new clothes. The snowstorm the weatherman promised hadn't materialized, and the temperature was only in the low 40s. All in all, a pretty nice day to be out and about.

When I reached the Old Capitol grounds, I noticed several people standing by the steps. Maybe 200 or so. I thought it was awfully late in the year to hold a protest. Let alone one that would attract this many people. Initially, I wrote it off as part of the craziness of this town.

As I drew closer, I could finally make out the speaker and what he was saying. He appeared to be an older man, late 50s with bright white hair. Kind of overweight. He kept talking about God's love and the redeeming power of faith. He was quite animated as he preached.

Another Pentacrest preacher, I mused to myself as I walked by. His voice seemed to carry well, considering that he didn't have a loudspeaker or microphone. But I didn't have time for him. What did he know about Heaven and Hell? I'd looked into a demon's eyes and made up my own mind about which side I was on.

"All of you must stop and listen to what I have to say!" the man shouted. The end of the world is at hand, brothers and sisters! Hell's gates have swung wide, and the spawn of Satan walk among us!

I kept going.

"Heed me or be damned to hellfire!" The preacher said, and I felt the hairs rise on the back of my neck. It felt as though he were talking to me alone.

I really didn't have time for this. I circled the crowd and headed for the clothing store. That boring brick building never looked so inviting before.

"Hey!" someone yelled.

I turned around. Three people had detached themselves from the crowd and were following me. The leader was a blond guy, not much older than myself, with wire-framed glasses and a tailored suit. His friends, a man and a woman in jackets and jeans, followed hard on his heels. The other man was broad-shouldered and looked like his nose had been broken more than once.

"Where are you going?" Blondie asked, like I needed his permission to cross the square. The tough guy behind him looked like he was ready to back up whatever Blondie had to say.

"I'm not interested," I replied, waving in the preacher's general direction.

"You're not interested in the good word?" he replied.

"I've got a Bible at home."

"Do you understand it?"

This was fucking annoying. "Would you stop asking me questions? I'm sorry, but I'm just not interested in your little sermon."

"I'm truly sorry, too," the man replied. "I'm just trying to figure out why you don't want to hear the reverend's good word." He gestured toward the crowd. "Everyone else does."

I looked back at the crowd. They were all intently listening to him. Too intently. Where were the hecklers? They were too quiet. No one was leaving the crowd. Someone had to have a class to attend. Someone had to get bored and leave. But no one moved.

"You're the only one who doesn't want to hear his word."

That's when I felt a chill race along my spine. The preacher was more than he appeared. Was he like Jim? Was Jim the reason why I wasn't being affected like the rest?

I couldn't panic. I had to play cool.

"I guess it's my loss. I'll have to figure out the Lord's word at home."

The others tried to surround me. The burly guy blocked my way to the Old Capitol. The woman blocked my way to the steps leading down the hill.

"Are you a religious man, sir?" Blondie asked, a little too casually.

"Sure," I lied.

The man paused for a second. His eyes looked off to the side, perhaps at the preacher. Wrong answer, he said coldly.

I jerked my head toward Burly. He threw a punch, but I leaned back away from the blow and took a glancing hit to the cheek. Before he could follow up I stepped inside his guard and punched him square in the nose. The cartilage snapped and blood poured down his face. He staggered backward, sitting down hard on the pavement. Someone wrapped their arms around me from behind, and I looked down to get a glimpse of

Blondie's spit-shined shoes. Too bad for him I was wearing engineer's boots; I stamped down hard on the arch of his foot and felt the bone break. He let out a yell and doubled over, and I punched him in the temple. Blondie fell without a sound.

That just left the woman. She hadn't moved from her place near the stairs, and as I turned to face her, she smiled, showing a mouthful of pointed teeth. Oh shit.

"That will be enough," a voice said from behind me. The woman's grin vanished in an instant, and she bowed her head like a trained dog. I looked over my shoulder to see the preacher helping Blondie to his feet. The crowd was already dispersing, walking as if in a dream.

The preacher's eyes were black as death, bottomless and cold. He was a demon, just like Big Jim. Suddenly I realized I'd stumbled into something way over my head.

The demon looked me over and smiled a reaper's grin. "I knew we'd stumble across one of Guriel's hounds soon enough," he said, half to himself. Then he looked me squarely in the eyes. "Let your master beware. His days here are numbered. The Abyss awaits."

Then he turned his back on me, beckoning to the others. Blondie and Burly helped one another along, both of them glaring balefully at me as they went. The woman started to leave, took one look at her master, then leaned in close. She laid a finger against my throat, right over the jugular. I barely felt the claw prick my skin.

"If you're lucky, you'll never see me again," she whispered. Then she fell in line with the rest.

THE UGLY TRUTH

I made it home late that night, after a long second shift. I was tired and my nerves were on edge, and I just wanted to go to bed. When I flipped my light switch, the light didn't come on. I sighed and hoped that I still some extra bulbs.

"You've disappointed me, Ed," said the silken voice, making the night air tremble.

For a moment I didn't know what to do. I'd known that sooner or later this day would come. I took a deep breath and stepped into the apartment, closing the door behind me. It's been a while, Big Jim. What can I do for-

"Shut up, and listen," Jim snapped. "You've been too open with my girl."

"But you never told me..."

"I never told you because I thought you'd be smart enough to know better. He snarled. You're lucky to be alive. You're lucky, I don't kill you myself."

"I'm sorry," I stammered. "I didn't know. What was I supposed to do?"

"Nothing! You were supposed to do absolutely nothing! There are others of my kind who want to destroy me."



They must have followed me here. Now they know you belong to me. I should punish you right now.

"That's not fair! You didn't tell me any of this before. Hell, all I did was cross the damn Mall. It's not my fault that preacher's mumbo jumbo didn't work on me. You should—"

I felt something crawling on my hand. Instinctively, I let go of the door and tried to brush it off. As I did, I staggered into the darkness. Now I was lost in my own room. I could hear the sound of something, maybe hundreds of things, scurrying around my room, running over the papers on the floor. Two glowing eyes appeared in the darkness, staring down at me.

"There is a house on Governor Street. The address is on your table. Every night, I want you to watch it until dawn. From time to time I'll ask you for a report. Just keep a record of who comes and goes."

"But Jim, I work nights now."

Jim growled. "You made a promise to serve me, Ed. If you won't live up to the bargain, then the deal's off and I'll take back my gifts."

My heart went cold. Live like a cripple again? Oh, God...

"Okay, I'm sorry. How long do you want me to watch the house?"

"Until I say otherwise, Ed. You still remember how to follow orders, don't you?"

I heard someone screwing a light bulb into a socket. Seconds later, the light came back on, blinding

me. When I could see, Jim stood in the middle of the room. His hair had grown out into a matted tangle, and now he had an unkempt beard. His clothes were caked in mud.

"Pray to me that this will be resolved quickly. Otherwise, I might not be able to guarantee your continued mobility."

He left without another word. I spent the rest of the night at the kitchen table with a glass of vodka in my hand, wondering what I'd gotten myself into.

PRISONER OF WAR

I watched the house just like Jim told me too. My mother was kind enough to let me use her car. I told my boss at work that I had to take a medical leave of absence for a while. He was pissed, but he said I'd still have a job when I got back.

The house was a rental property, and the preacher lived there with his flunkies. Not doing much from what I could tell. They usually stayed in at night. If they were up to something, they weren't doing it outside. From time to time I was tempted to sneak in for a closer look until I remembered that I was dealing with a demon, for God's sake, not a bunch of drug dealers.

On the fifth night, Blondie and Burl left around midnight and returned a couple hours later. I watched them drag a guy from the trunk of their car and hustle him into the house. He seemed alive, but his coat was in tatters and his face looked like it was covered with blood. I bet he didn't have much longer to live. For a few long minutes I debated what to do. I could call the cops,

but after seeing what the preacher did to the crowd at the Capitol, I figured that for a lost cause. That left just me. Jim's orders had been pretty clear: just watch the building and report back. He wasn't the guy I remembered from the night at the boarding house. Something had changed him for the worse, and I didn't much care to have him angry at me ever again.

But someone's life was at stake. I couldn't just ignore that. Finally I got my Maglite and my pistol from the trunk and crept up to the house.

It was an older home, with a fieldstone foundation and small windows that looked into the basement. There was a light on down there, and I found a window that revealed Blondie and Burly working the poor guy over. Blondie would ask the questions, and Burly would try to jog the guy's memory with a broken-off car antenna. Blood flew with every stroke.

I chambered a round in the pistol and tried to think of a plan. What would I do once I got inside? Shoot the two men? What would I tell the cops? You see officer, I was following orders from my demonic master, who told me to watch this house, and then—

Wait, I remember thinking suddenly. Where's the woman and the preacher?

That was when I felt the talons prick the back of my neck, and a wave of ice rushed down my spine. The world spun, and everything went dark.

When I came to, I was sprawled on the basement floor where the other prisoner had been sitting. The weak light shone on the loops and streaks of blood scattered across the concrete. Blondie and Burly waited to one side, looking smug. The woman watched me from her perch on a nearby work table. She smiled and ran a delicate tongue over the tips of her talons when she saw I was awake.

The preacher stepped from the shadows. No, that's not right. A patch of shadow became the preacher. He was darkness with a death's head face.

"You fool," the demon said, shaking his head. "I showed you mercy once before, but here you are again." He gestured to Blondie and Burly with a long-fingered hand. "I haven't any patience left, mortal, and I am not in the habit of making threats. So Mr. Andrews and Mr. Smith here are going to take a pair of flensing knives and skin you from neck to groin. They're quite practiced, so I imagine it won't take more than half an hour or so. The pain will be excruciating. More than a human mind can normally take." The demon leaned in close. "But you will not pass out. You will not die. You will know nothing but agony until you're ready to tell me where your master is."

"I don't know where he is!" I blurted. Some brave spy I was. He doesn't tell me shit!

"Ah, I see." The demon stared long and hard at me. "Then I expect we will be here for some time."

That was when the lights went out. Someone, I think Burly, let out a yell, and then I heard a door torn from its hinges. A voice shouted something in a language that raised the hairs on the back of my neck, and then there was only the sound of screams.

I lay on the cold concrete, feeling another man's blood seep through my clothes, not daring to move. Something sprayed across my face. A man choked and gurgled.

After what felt like an eternity, the light came back on. I still see the scene in my dreams.

There were no bodies. Just pieces of flesh and strips of blood-stained clothes. A monster with Big Jim's face stood in the center of the room, dripping with gore.

"What the hell is happening?" I whispered, half afraid of gaining the creature's attention. What is going on?

"You wouldn't understand," Jim growled. "You mortals never do."

"They were going to skin me like a rabbit!" I said. "I deserve to know what you've gotten me caught up in!"

The monster snatched the lapels of my coat in his claws and lifted me off my feet. After all I've done for you, you dare to question me? After all the suffering I went through to save you, you dare to question me? You caused me so much pain, and still I give you gifts. He glared at me. How dare you! How dare you!

I'd never seen anyone this angry before. The hate seemed to burn through my clothes.

"Please," I begged. Please tell me what I am risking my life for.

"They were servants of an old enemy. She wants to destroy me. His eyes narrowed. Now that I've killed her hunting party, she will gather up whatever forces she has at her disposal and tear this city apart until she finds me. Of course, this also presents me with an opportunity for an ambush. You will help defend me from her and her vassals. This is the new meaning of your existence. When the time comes, I will call you again. And you will answer, no matter where you are in the world." He let me go. You've run up a hell of a tab tonight, Ed, Jim said, his voice thick with pain. And now it's time to pay up.

That's when I noticed the deep wounds along the monster's flanks. In some places I could see blood-streaked bone gleaming in the light. And then Jim reached into my mind and I felt his wounds as well. I felt his hatred and his madness, eating away at my mind.

I fell into blackness, an abyss without end.





CHAPTER THREE: THE DAMNED AND THE DECEIVED

Every step towards truth has had to be fought for and there has had to be abandoned for it almost whatever otherwise human hearts, human love, human confidence in life, are attached to. Therefore greatness of soul is required: the service of truth is the hardest service.

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*

FALLING STARS

David—

This is the last installment. Per your instructions, I've included the courier envelopes and copies of the mailing labels, but I don't think it will do you any good. The author went to a lot of trouble to stay anonymous, and if he doesn't want to be found, you aren't going to find him.

I was talking to Marta last night. She says you've been acting really strange lately. What is this obsession about demons? She said you told her that you thought the head of your department was possessed. Is that what all this is about?

Tony Spruce sat in the holding cell and tried to sort things out. It was difficult. Every time he tried to follow a line of thought, it started to drift toward nothingness.

He remembered a quote he'd read in a book somewhere — one of those volumes about science versus superstition. Maybe it was Carl Sagan's one, he couldn't remember. Anyway, the quote was, "The man who submits unconditionally to the will of God must relinquish not only his will, but his understanding." It was crazy, no way to live a life. But it was also so easy.

Tony hurt inside about Robin Johnson, deeply. But over that was still the numbness, the inclination to just let the whole thing slide. Like that car accident, the potentially messy litigation which he did now remember. He had ignored it, and it had gone away. God had provided — even the replacement vehicle.

Had Jesarian done that to him, given him that layer of protective ennui? Was it the shock of revelation or a deliberate messing



with his mind? Was it just him, since Dian died? Was it everybody?

Overanalysis, asshole, he thought wearily. You're in a jail cell, and your defense lawyer thinks you're a lunatic.

He wished he knew what orientation the cell was facing, so he could map the stars onto the ceiling. Just picking arbitrarily wasn't going to work.

He hoped that they would let him see Robin again, let him explain and apologize and help. No. He didn't care what *they* let him do. He'd do it anyway.

He wished he had a window.

There was a change in the quality of the room. It was dark when Tony opened his eyes, but that was not it.

"Jesarian?" he whispered.

Nothing but the barest whisper of traffic.

He stretched, got up, paced the cell. His bladder was half full and he drained it, to be ready. He should have no idea what time it was, but as he thought about that, he realized that he *did* know. It was a few minutes before nine, and he was pacing an exact North-South axis, and, yes, Jesarian was near.

"Mine eyes have opened to the wonders of the Lord," he whispered. Another quote, surely, but he did not care.

But the demon did not come for him – Robin did.

ESCAPE

"Get up, get up," the boy panted, only a dim shape in the blackness as he raced into the short corridor outside the cell.

"I am. It's fine."

Keys jangled in Robin's hand. The locks had been electronically opened when Tony had first arrived. The power must be out, he realized somewhat belatedly. It took three goes to get the key right, but the boy did it eventually, and the door slid open.

Tony stumbled out and held Robin, feeling his thinness – the unhealthiness of his skin and the unsteady warmth of his flesh. "I'm sorry," Tony said. "I'm so sorry. It's all messed up. I wasn't there. Jesus, Robin."

"You were never there."

He said this without rancor, as a statement of fact. They looked at each other as best they could in the deep gloom.

Tony realized something, all at once as if it had been obvious all the time. He had been treating the boy as a student, when in truth they were both peers, damaged goods left in Jesarian's wake. But that did not excuse him from what he had done. "I'm sorry."

"I know."

"We've got to get out of here," Tony said.

"That was my plan. C'mon." Robin led and Tony followed.

The building seemed deserted.

"All the cops are out the front. All the prisoners too. They forgot about you."

"Really?"

"Yeah, sort of. It's complicated. They're fighting. Not the cops, Helen and the other ones. But they're not, like, punching each other, I don't think. They were waiting for her. I think she was waiting for them, too." All this is short staccato bursts as the boy tried to navigate through the darkness. At least he seemed to know which direction he was going. There was more light in the rest of the station, but only from exterior street lamps, and the clutter made the path treacherous.

"And the police, they're just letting this happen?"

Robin turned, and maybe it was only coincidence that a street lamp limned his face with soft silver. "There are no police anymore. Not really. There are only powers of the dark and of the light".

"Right, okay," said Tony. He remembered what he had been thinking when he learned that Jesarian had killed Robin's parents. (Or had she? That was what he had assumed.) He'd been thinking about not being able to trust any of the institutions around him. But then there was Viney. Some of those cops might have been bastards, might have been working for these "other ones" even, but Viney was a real guy working in a real system. So were the people at school, quite separate from whatever the hell Jesarian was.

"Sounds like bullshit to me," he wanted to tell Robin, but he didn't, because he didn't want to hurt the boy anymore.

"Keep going," he said instead, and Robin resumed his unsteady course.

Tony took a step and then the whole room rotated. He stumbled, tried not to hit the ceiling. Instead he hit the floor.

"You all right?" Robin was whispering.

"I'm fine," he gasped, arms waving strangely. He didn't believe it – didn't even know why he said it. Then it all became clear.

This is it. This is what the bitch did to me. Is doing to me. When she's doing stuff, like Robin said. Jesus Christ help me. Happens mostly in bed, doesn't it? Mostly at night. You can pretend. Once at school. Yes, I think so, once in a classroom. Shrugged it off. Jesus, please. Traffic accident. No, that can't be right, can it? Jesus I'm so messed up.

The feeling had been like looking into the abyss. Like looking at the night sky, but while he'd sensed those deeps with an astronomer's eye – wherein all numbers were

too big for comprehension, so no big number could be overwhelming – this was different. Somewhere, Jesarian had looked into the abyss, and therefore, so had he. There had been no numbers to stand between him and it. Just his own human senses, which had shut down as fast as they could. The memory of it was still there, but it refused to be summoned. Self-preservation kicked in instead. He wondered how large those memories were, and how much damage they had done.

"C'mon," said Robin, and for the first time this evening Tony heard the strain in the boy's voice, barely there.

He's good. Damn good. We both are. Good at hiding the demon. Is that why she chose us? Fuck you and your sister, kid. Just fuck you and, Jesus, fuck me.

"I'm coming," panted Tony, climbing to his feet. The dizziness had mostly died down, but he would remember what it meant. He would protect Robin, and he would remember.

Then there was just one final corridor and a dash for the back door.

"Are you sure there isn't some sort of guard out there?" Tony said, in a sudden whisper, when they reached it.

"No."

"Well, here we go."

A sign on the door said that it was alarmed, but it opened easily and quietly, and the two ran out into the night, under the protection of a light cloud cover and the guidance of the moon.

They had no idea if the police were going to start issuing descriptions of them in the morning papers, so hotels were out. Robin thought they should go to Tony's house, with the idea that the police wouldn't think to look in such an obvious place.

Tony said he thought the police would probably check there first and Robin's place second.

According to Robin, Jesarian had given no instructions except that they weren't to leave the city. Audrey – Dian's mother – was an option Tony considered, but he rejected it on about three different levels of awfulness. At least they had the car, which Robin had picked up still parked at the school (with his own spare key), though that was also going to become conspicuous very quickly.

Whatever it was, they had to do it quickly.

REVELATIONS

"Let's go to my place first and grab some stuff," said Robin. "They can't be checking that already."

Tony agreed, not thinking about what sort of stuff Robin might be referring to.

Rochester Street was quiet at this time of night. Tony stood on the front lawn, in the

deepest shadow he could find, so as to keep an eye on the street while Robin rummaged inside. He wasn't much of a secret agent. When the woman walking along the sidewalk turned up the path to the front door, he stepped forward and said, "Who the hell are you?"

Of course he realized as soon as he said it. The strange jacket with bare legs beneath it, the garish lipstick. Maybe she could have been a girl out for a night on the town, but not here she wasn't.

The girl reached instinctively for her bag (*like the cop, Tony thought*).

"Sorry, mister. Wrong house."

"No, no, come back, Zoe." Robin was on the stairs, calling down. "He's a friend of mine."

Zoe looked at them both suspiciously, then shrugged and came closer.

"Hey, you're in. Takes all kinds for a party, right?" she said, smiling coyly. She didn't look sexy to Tony, she looked thin and sick and like an infant playing with grown-up fashions. He thought of Colleen Douglas and her color-coded electrons, the pride she had. *Did this girl have a decent teacher, ever? he thought. Did she have anybody?*

"I think you should go home," Tony told her gently.

"Yeah, that's a great idea," Robin piped up, unexpectedly. "We're looking for somewhere to stay. Me and my friend."

"Don't be stupid," said Zoe, with a sort-of laugh, maintaining the smile. "We going inside or what?"

"C'mon. We can pay?" A whiny questioning tone had entered Robin's voice. It didn't suit him.

"I'm not no fucking landlord, so piss off."

She took her own advice, and turned away. Tony moved to grab Robin as the boy jumped forward to persuade her otherwise. Too late.

Robin laid a hand upon Zoe's shoulder and Zoe screamed.

It was a cry of agony, nothing less. The girl staggered, hands flying up to her head, as the others jumped instinctively back. She tried to turn toward them, as if asking for help, and then she collapsed, her arms and legs flailing about her, her head snapping backward and forward, eyes showing only white.

Robin kept retreating, Tony leapt forward, trying to restrain the girl's flailing limbs, then gave up and concentrated on her head, trying to cradle it so she wasn't damaging her spine. It took maybe a minute for her to get quiet, and she finally went completely limp. Her breath was shallow; her eyes were back in the right orientation, but unfocused. Blood and saliva had fanned thinly from her mouth and



nose across her face. Tony wondered vaguely about contagion as he checked her pulse. That at least seemed steady.

Robin was crying softly.

"Can you drive?" Tony barked, trying to break through the tears. "Robin. Can you drive?"

The boy nodded. He wouldn't be legal, but he'd already done so once this evening, and Tony didn't trust him to look after the girl.

He only touched her, he thought. But he'd worry about that later.

He picked her up – so light, such a contrast to the strength of her convulsions – and carried her to the car.

"You picked up drugs in there, didn't you?"

Robin shook his head.

"Give them all to me."

Robin glared. *Equals*, Tony reminded himself. *I can't judge him, but I can still try to do what needs to be done.*

"I've called an ambulance," a woman said, coming toward them from 122 Rochester. "You shouldn't move her, you know." Her words sounded kindly, but the look on her face was one of deep disapproval, particularly toward Robin. Tony knew how she felt.

"In the car," he said to the boy impatiently, and he managed only a curt nod to the woman as they drove away.

Robin pulled up at the emergency ward driveway, coming to a too-sudden halt. Zoe rolled in Tony's arms, but he held her safe.

He tried to juggle the seatbelt open, Robin hopping out to help him with the door – then Tony yelled, "Get back here!"

The boy put his head in the car, looking distressed and confused. "Drive, drive!" Tony shouted. "Get us out of here. Anywhere."

The urgency caught, and Robin jumped back in – the engine was still running – and sped off. Without his belt he was being thrown around by his uneven driving far too much, but there was no helping that now.

"What the hell is going on?" Robin asked, half angry, half cowed.

"It was a cop," said Tony, though it was worse than that. It was the cop who had beaten him, the plainclothes man he'd first seen in the school corridor. The one that was working for the enemies of Jesarian, he had no doubt. Tony craned around to peer through the back window, and just before he lost sight of the emergency room doors, the man strolled out of them. "Don't think he saw us."

"What do we do?"

So much was happening. Where was Jesarian? God helps those who help themselves – that's what they said. Tony thought they were lying.

"Gotta find a clinic, or something. Twenty-four-hour medical center. They can help her."

"Where? I'm already lost."

"I don't know. I really, just do not know."

"We need someplace with a telephone directory. Service station maybe."

Tony doubted that very much.

He checked Zoe again. Still unconscious, but her breathing was getting better. Maybe she'd pull through. And maybe she'd just die in his arms.

"Wait, turn left here, I know somewhere. My..." He didn't quite know how to explain the relationship, which seemed a ridiculous concern. "My mother-in-law isn't too far away. We'll just call an ambulance from there. Best we can do."

"Okay, just point me in the right direction."

Audrey Hemmings lived in a comfortable block of flats on a busy road. Robin's driving had steadied, and he took the final corner at a controlled speed. Tony noticed he'd managed to put his seatbelt on at some point during the drive.

He was calming himself again, trying to remember how long a body could run on adrenaline. Not for too long, before the adrenaline turned to poison. *Relax*, he told himself. *Calm*.

Then he started to sob.

Robin drove right past the flats as Tony looked in mute horror at the plainclothes policeman walking up the path toward the door.

! ! !

Robin turned the radio on, trying to find something — music or news, presumably — on the dial. Since they were parked under a large brick railway bridge, as close to being out of town as they could find, he was getting nothing, and Tony snapped at him to turn the damn thing off.

"Sorry," the teacher said, in the ensuing silence. "I'm just very tired."

Robin shrugged. Even Zoe seemed to murmur something noncommittal, her condition now closer to sleep than unconsciousness. He was almost jealous.

The clouds had thinned in the hour they'd been there, and there were stars in the sky. They calmed him, but they were also calling to him, telling him to fight, but he did not know who or what or how.

"Tell me about your sister," he said. "How did she come to you?"

"She was an angel. She was beautiful."

"I wish I'd seen that."

"You will. She was always beautiful, but this was special. So full of light. And I think she was happy."

Fine words for someone whose gaze traveled, every few minutes, up the legs of the unconscious prostitute in the back seat, though he would be hard-pressed to make much out in the darkness.

"Was it worth it?" Robin asked unexpectedly. "What she did to you?"

It took a long time to answer that. It was all in pieces. He saw the cop's fist plunging down toward his face. Saw Pendrick's unreadable look in the corridor. Saw cracks in a windshield, only half seen in the glare of a lamp, could have been anything. Was any of that about Jesarian, really? He saw the echoes of the Abyss lodged in his mind.

"I don't know what she did to me. Whatever it was, I wasted it, and she took more than she said." Of course, she hadn't said anything, but the point still seemed valid.

"You were a good teacher," Robin said, sleepily. "In the last couple of weeks especially, since she touched you. Other kids thought so, too. Said you showed them stuff."

"Now you're just trying to cheer me up."

In the darkness he thought he saw the boy shrug.

"How are you, Robin?"

"I want the stuff." After they parked Tony had taken the stash — white powder and pills, plus various dirty-looking paraphernalia — and disposed of them in a nearby creek. Maybe that wasn't the safest for anything trying to live in it, but that was just tough. He'd been careful to take the car keys while he'd done it. "And I want her."

"She's very sick."

Robin nodded, scratching idly at his sleeve, and seemed to drift off toward sleep, leaving Tony alone with the stars.

A good teacher, he thought. Doesn't help me now.

So what? the stars asked him. *That was what you wanted, that was what you got. And you still wouldn't have it any other way.*

He didn't trust the stars, but he had a strange feeling they were right.

CROSSROADS

"Arzagally," Zoe murmured, turning fitfully on the seat. Tony looked at her with a start, but whatever she had said, it had been blurred — could have been anything. Dawn had come, and in the slowly brightening day she looked almost worse than last night, although Tony had wiped off the blood, some of the makeup with it. The light only highlighted her wasted skin, and she turned away from it. Tony reached back to pat her shoulder, not having much else to comfort her delirium. He wondered if he was going to end up with two teenagers with major withdrawal symptoms on his hands. Given his

luck... though he supposed it would be better than whatever the hell happened when Robin had touched her.

Speaking of whom, the boy was asleep, lying back in the driver's seat in what looked like a particularly uncomfortable position. His eyes flickered a little, and Tony knew that he was deep in a dream-state, far from the world. (He checked that the keys were still in his pocket anyway, just as a precaution.) He tried to stretch the cramp from his legs and got out to inspect the creek by daylight.

"Ar'shegal," Zoe murmured, sounding pained. But instead of waking, she seemed to drift back deeper into slumber.

It wasn't a large creek, but it flowed fast enough, so he figured it was safe enough to wash his face in at least, whatever he or anyone else had dumped in it. He caught a glimpse of his reflection as he bent over, but it was not enough to make out any details. A night on the run from the police and the enemies of his demonic patron probably hadn't had that much of an effect as yet, he suspected.

The water was cold, waking him up – more than he wanted. He had successfully avoided trying to work out what had to be done today, but in the bracing shock, all those questions started crowded him again. As far as he could tell from watching the news, dodging the police was forty percent luck, sixty percent institutionalized incompetence, neither of which he had any control over. He suspected that neither was going to hold off the cop from last night for long. Tony had worked out that he'd been checking the hospital because Robin had so recently escaped from there. Why he'd been visiting Dian's mother, however, he could not tell. He suddenly realized with a spurt of fear that it may not just have been a matter of asking questions. He hoped Audrey was all right. He would have to call. That would be safest.

How's this for a metaphor? he thought, directing it at his shadowy reflection. I can see all that stuff, somehow sense the depths of the cosmos, the potential of it. And I can do no more with it than I can fight terrorism by reading the New York Times online.

Jesarian was in town. Today he would find her. He would ask her what he had to do. That, and every other question he could think of.

And what about this? he thought again. A body in a decaying orbit about a star. Enjoying the view.

He sighed and discovered that he was extraordinarily hungry.

But then there was a strangled gasp from the car, and Tony forgot all about those things. He ran.

"Get away from her!" he shouted, but Robin ignored him. Zoe was lying half out of the car, her legs sprawled on either side of the boy's form, her jacket hiked up. Tony grabbed the boy's shoulder, swung him around. He got a quick impression of the girl's face – confused and blinking at the light – and then it was all Robin, and Tony was punching him.

"God damn it, you little shit!" Tony shouted at him. The boy pedaled backwards, arms flailing up at him, ineffectual. Tony pushed those arms aside and swung again, connecting with the chin. Robin almost fell, but he kept his balance. Tony shoved at him. "You fucked-up little bastard! I've tried–"

"Help me," Robin was saying. Although there was pain in his eyes, there was no sleep, no confusion. Tony swung again, wildly, only a glancing blow near the side of the neck.

"Help me, please," Robin said.

"Why?" said a cold, cold voice from behind Tony, and the teacher froze. Robin stepped back again, but in the sudden cessation of attack he finally did stumble on the rough ground.

Tony turned.

"Because I am yours," the boy said.

The policeman sat in the open door of the car, smiling at them both. He was holding Zoe in his lap, one hand around her waist, the other up in her hair. Tony managed to register the fact that the cop had a fist of that hair pulled tight, almost tearing at the scalp beneath it. Zoe wasn't making a sound.

"Bow-wow," the cop said.

Robin crawled hurriedly past Tony, managing to get to his feet by the time he reached the two of them, and he turned back defiantly at his former teacher.

"Give me the keys," he said to Tony, with a sullen triumph in his voice.

"Not necessary," said the demon shaped like a cop, holding them up. Tony didn't know how they'd been taken from his pocket. He didn't care.

"Jesarian will be here," he said. "She's going to stop you."

"She has other concerns. She is not here to fight me, if that's what you think. She and I have what you might call an unfriendly agreement."

"You think she's going to let you do this to her brother?"

"Maybe, maybe not."

"It's my decision," Robin said. "She's not my sister, she hurt me."

"I thought you had something," Tony said to him. "Thought there was something worth protecting. Except now it turns out you're just a spoiled brat. What did he offer you? What was worth it?" Brave words

for someone with the dark stain of urine down the front of his pants. He also would very much like to know *when* this had happened, but he could not work that into his righteous questioning.

One of the prostitutes found him, Viney had said. But maybe somebody else had found him first, swinging on a rope. He didn't know, but it seemed suddenly, horribly, plausible.

Robin sneered at him, grabbed the keys from the cop, and walked around toward the driver seat. As he did so, the sleeve of his shirt pulled back, and in the morning light Tony saw that the arm was bare.

The scars, he realized sadly. Maybe it didn't take the rope after all. He had thought the boy was linked to Jesarian, but that wasn't quite true. She had never given him a choice.

"And what do you want?" said the demon to him. "I can offer you no power, but perhaps one day, when your master is no more..."

Tony didn't answer.

"What about the scent of Dian, a reminder of her, forever close? As a token for keeping my boy safe."

Tony snorted. "I have refused that before. But give me Zoe."

"Can't," the demon said, a shit-eating grin on its face. "She gave herself to me, and even I cannot break that contract. You'd know about that. But you can borrow her for a while."

He pushed her away from him, and Tony ran forward to catch her. As he did, the car sped away.

† † †

Two weeks later; another town, another state. Zoe was asleep on the other bed. It had been a bad day for her, suffering one of her attacks. The demon was doing it to her, or so she said.

It was then Jesarian came before Tony, walked into his hotel room while he lay there, looking at the stars. Zoe did not stir.

"I thought you'd come as an angel," Tony said, because it was only Helen Johnson's body that stood before him. She was dressed better than she had been the last time he had seen her.

"Quiet," said Jesarian. "You have disappointed me."

"Yeah, well." He didn't want to point out the obvious, that he had disappointed pretty much everybody he'd ever met, and did a whole lot worse to some.

"I told you not to leave your town, and you did so."

"That's it? What about Robin? Everything is all fucked up. What the hell was going on? Were you even there? Pendrick, he must have been another minion. And Robin. Did you know

he was... turned, or whatever? That bastard cop was following us, for the *fun of it*, as far as I... Wait. You want Zoe, don't you? To get at him. I won't—"

"Quiet," she said again, more gently this time.

He could not speak, could not raise a fist against her gaze.

"I was wrong about Robin, I admit that. When I killed him, he knew who I was. This Pendrick I do not know. Perhaps he is of interest, perhaps he is just a man. The less you know of such things, the safer for yourself and myself. Your faith clothes me, Tony Spruce, allows me to present myself as I once was. I need nothing more. Even that you have disappointed me is of little concern, because there are others."

She smiled then, the smile of a girl about to embark on a big adventure (perhaps to become a *real* courier), with some trepidation in her heart. "You can love her, if you want," she said, indicating Zoe. "She will not mind, and he will take her life soon enough, regardless. Perhaps it will give you both some moments of peace."

Tony shook his head furiously, trying to shout.

"Do not underestimate what I do for you. I have treated you kindly, Tony Spruce, though I can afford to do so no more, for my enemies press about me, depleting me. I have shown you Creation, yet I take so little in return."

Her smile faded, and she reached for him, without moving at all. The pain flowered in his mind. It was madness, and while it remained, the only part left to him believed it was madness without end.

SIREN SONG

January 24

In the weeks following my little bit of financial wizardry for Jenny, I saw less and less of her. Oh, she repaid the money all right, but a little later than I would have liked. It proved much easier than I thought to manipulate my bosses into ignoring the small hole in our accounts, so much so that I found I could steadily siphon off a small flow of funds for my own uses. That was great, and it helped silence my doubts for a while. It is always easier to pretend everything is normal while Jenny's away.

Once in a while, Jenny asked for further cash injections, some of which she never paid back. I

had my bosses eating out of my hands, taking whatever I said as read, while my juniors either listened to what I said or were told by Nigel and Peter that everything was in order. I even let Peter take me out on a couple of dates. The man had expensive tastes, I can tell you that. We ate in some of the best and most upscale restaurants in town and then went for drinks in a ritzy hotel bar afterwards. He had a tab there, would you believe? Perhaps that was a good thing. It made me think of how many girls he'd seduced in one of the rooms upstairs, and it convinced me not to let him do the same to me. He could look all he liked, even touch a little, but he wasn't getting me in his bed.

Evenings like that helped keep me busy while Jenny wasn't around. Whatever she and Karl were up to, it was occupying most of her time so I clearly wasn't needed. Sure, she called me up a few times and asked me to do her a few little favours, but my time was generally my own. I was working pretty short hours at the office, too. Nigel only came in a few days a week at the moment. His wife had had some form of nervous breakdown after my little intervention in her life. I felt guilty about that, but I told myself that I'd done her a favour. After all, she was spending more time with her husband than she had done in over a decade. Perhaps they wouldn't take each other for granted anymore.

Talking of taking people for granted, David and I were getting along swimmingly, and Cati was none the wiser. All David wanted deep down inside was his wife to be sexy and vivacious and, more importantly, to pay attention to him like she did when he first met her, instead of being the focused, high-spending power wife she was now. It was so easy to give him what he wanted, and I know from my own experience how simple it can be for a husband to find excuses to be away from his wife when he had someone better to do.

I took the relationship steadily at first. I made David feel like he was the one doing all the running, trying to woo me. I resisted and agonised and debated until I was sure I had him firmly hooked. Then I reeled him in. We'd been seeing each other for a couple of months when I finally made the decision to sleep with him. This had become about far more than teaching Cati a lesson. This was about making David - who was a pretty nice guy - and me happy. Frankly, Cati didn't deserve or appreciate him, just as Brian didn't deserve or appreciate me. It all came to a head one night in my apartment. David knew that it was getting to the time when he should leave. I could see damn

clearly that he didn't want to, and I knew that I didn't want him to either. He didn't even put up a token struggle as I drew him, at long last, into my bedroom.

RELEASE

January 25-

It felt better than I expected. I had been nearly two years since I last had sex, and this was amazing. David was a good lover, far more intense and focused on me than Brian had ever been. It all seemed so natural at first. We moved from kissing to petting and smoothly through into the bedroom. I felt a touch of guilt at first, a nagging voice telling me that this was wrong, that I was betraying Brian and that I was breaking my marriage vows. I guess that the habits of the best part of 20 years die hard. Still, I'd got good at ignoring nagging doubts since I met Jenny, and I lost myself in the warm pleasure of sex.

And then my head exploded. I felt like someone was dragging nails through my skull. I screamed and collapsed sideways, the side of my head feeling wet suddenly. I saw David sit upright in shock before my vision changed. I glimpsed creatures fighting, some from the air, with wings and claws, while at least one was wielding some form of sword. The last thing I thought of before I blacked out was Jenny.

When I came round, I was looking down at blood pooled on the sheets and David's concerned face. I tried to speak but found my voice croaky and unresponsive.

"Are you all right? What did I do?"

I felt a coolness on my face and realised that he was sponging around my ear.

"The bleeding seems to have stopped now, thank God," he said. "Shall I call a doctor?"

"No," I croaked, trying to pull myself upright. I made it on the third attempt. "Where are my clothes?"

David hastened to find them for me. "Are you sure you should be up and about?"

He had a point. I felt like I'd just been beaten up, and that seemed like a good excuse to stay put. I sank back onto the bed.

"I feel like shit."

"Look. I should call a doctor."

"No. Not just yet."

He looked at me like I was mad, but I could just feel that this had something to do with Jenny. The pain had started at that point inside me where I can always feel her. It was still throbbing, if that's the right word.

"David, look, this is nothing to do with you. It's just an old problem, one that hasn't recurred in a

while." I managed a weak smile. "You must have got me too excited."

"You sure?"

"Yeah. Now, it's probably better if you get home before your wife starts worrying."

"I don't want to go."

"Go, David. I'll see you again later in the week. I promise."

He took some persuading, but he went. I had a quick shower to get rid of the worst of the blood, dumped the bed sheets in the washing machine and headed for Genny's place. I had to know what had happened. My doubts were all back, and they'd brought friends. I'd let Genny avoid this issue for far too long. She hadn't told me anything about this, or pretty much anything else. That had to change.

MYSTERY

January 26-

Genny's apartment was deserted. All her stuff was still there, but there was a big pile of post waiting for her, and the food in the fridge looked as if it hadn't been touched in weeks. I tried her mobile phone, but it was switched off. I slumped on the sofa and watched some TV for a while, and when I got bored, I tidied up her apartment, cleaned out the fridge and tried her mobile phone again. Nothing.

What choice did I have? I had to know what was happening with Genny and what had happened to me, and she was the only one who could tell me. Well, aside from Karl of course. Karl. Stupid.

I grabbed my purse and headed for the basement parking. It was only a short drive over to his house.

Shansona answered the door, looking worried. She had a similar relationship with Karl to the one I have with Genny, except I think the two of them are sleeping together. She looked surprised. "Linda? What you doing here? Have you heard from Karl or Genny?"

"Karl's not here?"

"No, I haven't seen him in a week or so," she said. "He said he had some business to attend to." Then she signed theatrically. Shansona liked being the centre of attention.

"What's up with him?" I asked.

"Don't ask me, girl, he just called four hours ago, sounding like shee-it. In fact, he sounded as rough as you look."

Four hours ago. That was just before I had the fit.

"Shit, Shanny, can you do me a favour? If you hear anything from Karl, anything at all, can you give me a call? Here's my mobile number."

I headed back to Genny's place to wait. I must have gone to sleep on the sofa, because that's where I woke, screaming. The pain was back and worse this time, as were the visions. There was anger and fear. With a start, I realised I was seeing through Genny's eyes. She was shouting at a petite Pakistani-looking woman, who was looking at her in frustration. Then there was pain, terrible pain, and the Asian woman changed, becoming this dark, alien shadow creature, with these eyes that just radiated sadness. They were my last thought as the darkness engulfed me.

For a few moments after I came round, I really wanted to die, just to make the pain stop. When it did, I lay there on the rug by the sofa crying quietly to myself for some time. Then I just lay still, waiting for the aches and the shock to subside. It didn't have enough energy or enthusiasm to get myself going again.

Judging by the droning of the presenters on the TV, it was mid-morning. They were still whining on about the morning's news and weather, but at that point, I really didn't give a damn about anything. I must have lain there for another hour or so before I finally dragged my aching body into the bathroom to check myself over. As before, I had bled freely, this time from the palms as well as the ears. The palms? What the heck was that about?

The night before, I'd been angry. Now I was just terribly afraid. I needed to talk to Genny or Karl or someone. I needed this to stop, now. I sat there on the bathroom floor for a little while, hugging my knees to my chest and crying with terror. What had I done?

ANSWERS

January 28-

My strength was slowly crawling back, I think, so I showered, borrowed some clothes from Genny's room, tried to hunt myself up some breakfast and failed. She'd obviously not been shopping in a good while. Hopefully that meant that she's been away a while and would be back soon. I had no idea what else to do but wait. What doctor was going to believe some tale about me spontaneously bleeding from the hands? I risked a quick trip to the shops, but Genny was still nowhere to be seen when I got back. I fixed up a brunch and waited.

Around mid-afternoon, just as I was getting thoroughly sick of daytime TV, the door opened. I sprang to my feet and rushed to the hall. My heart sank. It wasn't Genny, but Karl. He didn't look good. In fact, he looked like he'd been



C. Wilkins

pretty badly beaten up. He stopped when he saw my horrified reaction. Then a slow smile spread across his face and he started concentrating. His injuries just healed up as I watched. I felt my mouth drop open.

"Sorry about that, girl. Been too busy to deal with the scratches. Where's Sibraniel?"

"Where's who?" I stammered, now afraid and confused.

"Oh, sorry, Jenny. She said she'd meet me here,"

"I dunno," I said. "She hasn't been around for ages. I was waiting."

He grabbed my hand and pulled me towards him.

"Lemme look at you, girl," he snapped, looking at my hands and head. "You look like shit. She's been draining you, hasn't she?"

All I could do was nod, dumbly.

"Dammit, how long ago?"

"A couple of hours," I gasped. His grip was hurting.

He pushed me away from him and swore. "She's in trouble. I knew her meeting wouldn't go well. That slayer's a trouble magnet. I gotta find them."

And then he changed, just as I'd seen Jenny do. This was different, though. A pair of eagle's wings rose from his back as he started to glow with

an inner light that made me want to prostrate myself at his feet. Then scales formed over his body, turning my awe into terror. I backed away, frightened and confused. He looked like a demon. I had sold my soul to a demon. Oh, sweet Lord, I'd damned myself, and part of me had known all along that I was doing it.

The thing that Karl had become was ignoring me. He simply opened one of the windows and leapt out into the air. I sat there staring at the window for a long, long time, my brain almost blank with terror before I got up and closed it. Then I went home.

DESPAIR

January 29-

Going to work the next day was not a good idea. I didn't have the enthusiasm or the energy for it, but I was functioning on autopilot. Shock, I guess. Peter was going through some of the recent accounts when I got in. I should have expected it really, we were coming up to the end of the financial year and the accounts were needed for the auditors.

"Linda, I've got a few questions about these accounts," he said, with a twinkle in his eye. "Do you mind if we discuss this in my office?"

Reluctantly, I went with him, expecting him to turn this into some sort of a come-on. I was not disappointed.

"Well now, I can see a few irregular transfers and a few gaps in the accounts here, sweetheart." Oh, how I loathed him calling me that. "I'm sure you have some good explanations, don't you? Probably just a few mistakes made while Nigel was away, right? After all, you don't have his experience. Hey, you could tell me all about it over dinner."

On, I just couldn't face the idea of dinner with him that night. Fending him off was kind of amusing when I was feeling good, but right now I wasn't up to it. In fact, I just didn't care about any of this. I had sold myself to a demon. Jenny's words on the beach suddenly came back to me then: "I'm an angel." I hadn't believed her. I'd assumed she was talking metaphorically.

I became slowly aware that Peter was still talking to me, like the drone of a fly at the edge of my hearing.

"Linda? Are you listening to me?"

"Uh, look Peter," I said. "I can't, not tonight anyway. I'm really not feeling too hot. maybe in a few days?"

Peter looked annoyed. "my wife will be back in a few days," he said, a wheedling tone in his voice. "I won't be able to spend the whole evening on you." Did he really think those little "slips" were flirtatious?

"I'm really sorry, but I just can't. not tonight, anyway. Probably not ever," I said. And started to walk out of the office before I was interrupted by him shouting at me.

"I would suggest that you start coming up with a really good reason for all these movements from the accounts, then, because I might start jumping to some very worrying conclusions if you don't."

I didn't do much for the rest of the day. I just sat there, slumped in front of my PC, occasionally playing solitaire and ignoring the string of emails from David, checking to see if I was OK. Of course I wasn't OK. What did he think had happened? A severe nosebleed? Nigel was in that day and was called into conference with Peter shortly after I left his office. Once they'd been in there a couple of hours, I decided that I'd had enough of this pretence and went home. I didn't care anymore. There was nothing they could do that was worse than what I'd done to myself.

DISCOVERY

January 30-

I went to bed when I got home and just lay there. I didn't know what else to do. what was the point?

I heard a knock at the door in the early evening, and I reluctantly extracted myself from my duvet and padded across the hall to see who it was. Much to my surprise, it was David. I snuggled into his arms before he said anything and drew him into the apartment. He started firing question after question at me, but I wasn't listening. I just wanted his closeness and comfort, and I wanted it now. Anything to distract me from what had happened, what I'd done. He shut up pretty quickly when I drew him into bed with me, and we kissed and cuddled for a while.

I curled up into his arms, and I think I must have drifted off to sleep. I was so warm and comfortable, though, I just couldn't resist. The oblivion of sleep was so much more welcome than the real world. I only stirred back towards hazy consciousness when I suddenly sensed David pull away from me. Somebody far away was shouting, but I didn't care who it was. I just wanted to be warm and safe again and I tried to pull David back towards me. He resisted. The shouting was getting louder. Reluctantly, I pulled myself from sleep and opened my eyes.

It was Cati, and she was screaming abuse at the pair of us. David was halfway out of bed, proving that he was still pretty much fully clothed, but that wasn't mollifying her in the slightest.

I really, really wanted Cati to just shut up and leave us alone right then. That bitch had no idea of what was going on. She had no idea how much I'd suffered, about how I'd been tricked. I'd show the selfish cow. I remembered all the pain I'd felt in my attacks and gathered it in my mind, shuddering as I touched the memory. And then I threw the pain of both attacks at her in one dose. She shrieked and then she finally shut up.

"That'll teach you, you bitch," I muttered to myself.

David didn't come back to bed though; he was too busy panicking. "Oh, Jesus, oh, Jesus," he was saying again and again. The irony didn't escape me. "It's all my fault, isn't it? This is some punishment on me for sleeping with you."

I staggered out of bed, bleary-eyed and still only half awake. As I focused, I realised that he had a mobile phone at his ear and he was talking rapidly, giving someone my address. I threw myself towards him, but I was too late. He had hung up and was bending down, abjectly miserable as he looked at the bloody, unconscious form of Cati.

"You've called an ambulance, haven't you?" I asked.

"Yes. She's hurt," he replied simply. It was like I wasn't really there. He was holding her hand and whispering to her that help was on the way.

I wasn't staying there to be questioned by idiot police and to see David mooning over that stupid bitch. I grabbed the car keys and headed back to Jenny's flat. Better the devil I know, I thought. I found the pun depressing, not amusing.

REJECTION

January 31-

I waited at Jenny's place for two days, only venturing out for the occasional bit of shopping. The rest of the time I slept, read, watched TV or just sat around the apartment listlessly. I thought about calling work or David, but I couldn't face talking to anyone. What was the point? My job was screwed, my social life was screwed, and this woman owned my soul. What else could I do? So, I just waited until Jenny finally showed up.

It was mid-afternoon, and I was lying on the sofa, just staring through the skylight. When the door slammed, I jumped to my feet feeling oddly guilty. This time it was Jenny. She strode into the living room and stopped short. "What you doing here?" she said. "Damn, you look like shit, girl."

"I know," I replied. "And it's because you're doing something to me isn't it?"

She didn't say anything, just looked at me in surprise.

"Whatever you're doing to me, Jenny, I want you to stop it," I begged, falling to my knees. "I need you to stop it. It's destroying me, and it's destroying my life. Can't you see that?"

"I can't promise that, Linda," she said, looking at me in disgust. "I need what you have to give. You did give it freely, you know."

I felt sick. "Yes. I made a deal with the devil. You tricked me."

Jenny laughed at that. It was not a pleasant sound. "Hardly the devil."

"Why me?" I asked. "What did I do to deserve this?"

"You dare question me?" she snapped. "I, who made you so much more than you were before? I, who transformed your life? You mortals are all alike. Ungrateful, miserable fools who have no idea what we sacrificed for you. You have no idea what I've been through for you in the last few weeks and no idea what I've got left to do, do you? Answer me, girl."

As Jenny was speaking, she was changing again, showing me her true form once more. This time, though, the beauty was eclipsed by the horror of her shape. Oh, she was as amazingly beautiful as she always was when she changed. Her voice still sounded like the sweetest choir that ever sang, but now she had an extra pair of arms and these horrible claws replaced her hands. They were sharp, and they looked as if they could tear into me so easily.

I staggered back to my feet, trying to get away from her, and I found myself backed against a wall. I pushed myself against it as hard as I could, but she just kept on coming. I was terrified now, more frightened than I had ever been. I scrabbled at the wall, irrationally hoping that it would give way or swallow me up.

And then the pain started. It tore through my head and set every nerve in my body on fire. I could see myself, pathetic and desperate, curling up in fear and pain in my own mind. I started bleeding, but I couldn't tell where from. I didn't care. I just wanted her to go away, to leave me alone and to stop hurting me.

Through the pain I could hear her talking and laughing, saying that this was all that I was good for now, and how did I, a mere human, ever come to believe that I deserved to be the friend of one like her.

It was several hours before I woke up. The Jenny-thing was gone. I didn't bother to hang around to clean myself up. I just got out of that apartment, and down to the car. Once I was home again, I slumped on the sofa for a few hours, listless and more depressed than I've ever been. That's where I am now. I've been here for hours. I've slept a couple of times, so it could be days. I've lost track of time. The phone rings occasionally, but I ignore it. What's the point? Jenny's a thing of evil. I've lost my job. Yeah, there was an answering machine message from Peter when I got home, saying I shouldn't bother coming in again. There was one from the police, too. Something about missing funds from my old employer. Well, fair enough. I took the money.

I want to call David, but what's the point in that? I'm not sure he will forgive me for what I did to Cati. I don't want to find out, either. He's all I've got left now. I'm just sitting here, waiting for the pain to start again. I know it will. Will I survive this time? I hope not. It seems to get worse every time. Maybe this time it'll all end. Still, I don't know what she's doing or why, and I'd like

On God not again God no please stop hurts
hurts n

THE GOOD SOLDIER

I wasn't the same after the episode in the cellar. I started having nightmares most every night, and before long I'd crawled back in a bottle just to get a little sleep. Then there were problems at work. I couldn't stand the people I work with. The factory workers were idiots. My supervisor was an even bigger idiot. He tried to tell me how to do my job. We got into arguments almost every single day. If it hadn't been for the fact that he couldn't get anyone to work second shift, I'd have probably gotten shit-canned right off the bat.

I got into fights at the Eight Ball. Someone would be sitting in my usual spot or start to give me shit about looking at their girlfriend, or some idiot would hit me up for a game of pool and just waste my time. It never quite got out of hand - there'd be a lot of shouting and threats, but every time the guy who got in my face would see something in the depths of my eyes and back down. Maybe he saw the demon, or maybe he saw that I couldn't wait to start pounding his face into the floor.

It was like old times, back when I was crippled and hated the world. What Jim did to me in the basement of that old house had brought it all back, only much, much worse. I hated everyone, not because of what I was, but because of who they were - a herd of ignorant, ungrateful sheep, too dumb to appreciate the glories of the world.

On some level, I knew that it wasn't my hate I was feeling, but Jim's.

KINDRED SPIRITS

Two weeks later I ran into one of Jim's other soldiers down by the Pentacrest campus.

I decided to cut through the campus that afternoon while running some errands. I noticed a campus preacher by the steps, railing at a handful of bored spectators. The guy, who seemed to be in his 30s, paced back and forth, railing on and on about the evils of modern culture. The usual spiel from those guys. Of course, it was all the devil's work. If only he knew.

"God gave you a soul," the preacher said grimly. "Don't defile it with the temptations of Satan. Don't give it to anyone else!" I couldn't help but laugh. Easy for him to say. Ever been a cripple, preacher?

"How can you know all this from a rotting old book?" one of the spectators yelled. He was older than me, maybe in his late 20s, wearing a surplus fatigue jacket and faded jeans. His blond hair was long and pulled back into a pony tail, and his eyes shone with hate.

What a fucking loon, I thought at first. But then I looked a little deeper. It's not hard to see the demon in someone's eyes if you know what to look for.

The preacher and the blond man were really starting to get into it. The preacher kept quoting the Bible, and the blond man tried to shout him down each time. I watched the guy's hands clench into trembling fists, and I knew the kind of rage he was feeling. I could also see that he was losing control. The preacher kept right on, spewing hellfire and damnation from the good book at the guy.

Seconds later, the man charged the preacher. "Shut up!" he cried, swinging his fists. "You don't know what you're talking about! You don't know anything! You don't know the truth!" The punches missed, until the preacher was backed up against the stairs. A right hook sent blood gushing from his nose.

I ran up to the man and tried to grab him. "Let it go!" I cried. "He's not worth it."

The man brushed my arms aside. He looked at me and obviously recognized me. While he hesitated, I tried to grab him again. He shoved me back. I slipped on a patch of ice and fell onto the hard concrete.

"Stay out of this!" The man commanded me. He turned his attention back toward the preacher. "Can't you see that God doesn't love us?" He kicked the minister and kept repeating, "God doesn't love us! God doesn't love us!"

As I got up, two campus police officers charged at the man, both wielding nightsticks. The man elbowed one officer in the face and blocked the blow of the other officer's nightstick with his arm. A sickening crack echoed throughout the Pentacrest. I could see the man's arm was clearly broken. I was surprised it wasn't a compound fracture. The man held the broken arm toward the standing officer. Even I was amazed as the bone set itself and healed. The officer took a step back. His partner was still dazed from the blow.

The man took one look at me, then turned on his heels and ran for the street. The one cop still on his feet gave chase, yelling into his walkie-talkie. The preacher staggered to his feet, standing stooped over and shaking his head. Maybe he was just trying to clear his head, or maybe he was praying for the soul of the madman who'd hit him. A trail of red droplets splashed to the concrete with each mournful shake.

I stuck my hands in my pockets and got out of there, praying that no one had noticed what passed between myself and the man. There was no mistaking the look of recognition on his face when he glanced at me - or the naked expression of fear. The cold air stung my eyes as I ducked around the Old Capitol building. No one followed me, and I'm glad.



C. Wilkins

Had I gotten a taste of my own future? Was I going to become just like him, lashing out at anyone who got in my way? Was there anything I could do to stop it?

DOWNWARD SPIRAL

I got kicked out of the Eight Ball that night. Some goddamn drunk challenged me to a pool game. Said I looked lonely. I foolishly accepted. People hadn't socialized with me in ages. My old bar buddies were long gone.

This young punk challenged me to a game of eight ball. I don't care what he said later, he deliberately lost the first two games. His friends gathered for the third game. They didn't do anything except stand around and get on my nerves. I think they were trying to get others to bet on the game. The guy kept screwing his shots. The third game was an easy win.

Seconds after I sank the eight ball, he giggled. I could smell the beer and his breath from where I stood.

"I'll bet," he giggled again. "I'll bet you I'll win the next match."

I gave him a hard look. "You think you can huh?" I said, mocking him.

"Yeah," he said with a laugh. Then he reached into his pocket, and placed a roll of money on the table. "You in?"

The look in his eyes sent me right over the edge. The little fucker thought he could hustle me? This time, though, the rage took me by surprise. Instead of the slow burn I usually get, I just went cold all over. It was like someone else was moving my limbs, and I was just along for the ride.

"Fine," I heard myself say. "I'll break." And I hit him as hard as I could with the pool cue, striking him right between the eyes. The cue snapped with a crack like a gunshot, and the son of a bitch dropped like all his strings had been cut, collapsing to the floor with splinters sticking out of his face. Oh, that felt good.

Someone grabbed me from behind, lifting me from the ground without any effort at all. Two other bouncers got between me and the punk's friends. I was dragged away and slammed against the wall.

"He OK?" Joe, the head bouncer asked. His grip on me never slackened.

The fool was trying to get up, covering his face with his hands. Blood streamed between his fingers.

"Yeah," one of the other bouncers said. "We'll talk to him."

Joe dragged me toward the door.

"He tried to hustle me!" I protested.

"Shut up, Ed," Joe growled. "I knew you'd pull something like this one of these days, and I'm am well and truly sick of your shit."

Joe kicked open the door and literally threw me outside. I landed near the feet of a college couple walking by. They speedily walked away from me.

"You're not welcome here anymore, Ed," Joe said. "You're lucky we can't afford to have another police report on our file. Get out of here!"

It wasn't any big loss. Most of the people there were losers anyway.

BREAKING POINT

A month had passed since I'd last seen Jim. I knew better than to get my hopes up, though. He hadn't forgotten me. He'd turn up sooner or later and start barking orders, and if I wanted to keep walking, I was going to have to obey.

I'd been written up two more times at work, and my supervisor made it clear that if I so much as looked at him wrong I'd be out on the street so fast my head would spin. I started taking sick days almost every other week, staying cooped up in the apartment and getting drunk when it looked like I was going to have a bad day. I wasn't sleeping much. I started mixing booze and sleeping pills, but nothing made any difference.

Before long I started thinking about suicide again. This time, though, it didn't feel so much like giving in. It felt like a way to escape the cage I found myself in. I started cruising the pawn shops, looking at guns. Then one night I found myself holding an M-16 at a local store and thinking about how much damage I could do with a good firing position overlooking the downtown mall. It scared me so bad I didn't stop shaking for hours afterward.

Then one day, on the way to the store, I decided to check out the public library. I wondered if I could find a book or two on demons. There had to be something that could help me, or at least tell me where to go for help. That was how far gone I was.

As I walked toward the Periodicals Section, I noticed a familiar young woman sitting in one of the room's plush chairs. She was reading *H.E.L.P. Weekly*, one of the local alternative papers. Though she had blue-streaked hair, I remembered who she was. She didn't have her boyfriend with her this time. I walked up to her and tapped her dirty Doc Marten boot with my foot.

"Excuse me," I said. She looked up at me, obviously annoyed. I knelt down until my face was inches from hers. "I'm giving you a zero."

She started to say something, but I threw a hard right jab into her face. Her head jerked back, slamming against the hard white wall. Without thinking, I grabbed her and shoved her toward the newspaper case. She crashed into it, knocking the case over. The crash shattered the silence. I ran up to her and

kicked her a few times. No one tried to stop me. Then I picked her up like a rag doll and slammed her against the window. The people outside stared at me in horror as I punched her again.

"Don't you ever do that to anyone again!" I struck her again and again. "Do you understand?" I raised my fist again, but stopped. Her eyes were glazed over, and I could feel her convulsing slightly. I let go and she slid down the glass, leaving a smear of blood. She was dead.

I don't remember when the police showed up. They may have gotten there right away, or they could have taken hours. I didn't try to run. At some point it occurred to me that if I got arrested, there was no way Jim could come and get me. Maybe then he'd leave me alone.

They took me downtown. At some point, one of the detectives told me that the girl had been declared dead at the scene. He said a lot of other things. Threats mostly. I didn't pay much attention.

The next day my Dad paid my bail. He and mom got a second mortgage on the house and hired a lawyer. They couldn't understand why I screamed at them the whole way home.

DO OR DIE

Two days later, Jim came to my rooming house with four of his friends. I almost didn't recognize him with his long hair. His beard was gone, and his face had several burn marks on it.

"Get your coat," he commanded. "It's time."

"Where are we going? I have to be at trial in a few days!" I protested.

"Doesn't matter. Are you going to come, or do we have to drag you?"

We left Iowa City and drove for a long time. We might have even left Johnson County. We eventually arrived at an abandoned farmhouse. I couldn't see anything for miles around. His friends were busy boarding up the windows and loading boxes into the house. Each of them looked almost as disheveled as Jim, like they'd been living off the land for quite a while.

After parking the car, I was escorted inside to the living room. There, laid in neat rows along the hardwood floor, were almost two dozen high-powered rifles, including a handful of assault weapons. Boxes of ammunition and stacks of paper targets covered the room's coffee table.

"You will teach your fellow thralls how to use these weapons."

"What's going on?" I asked.

Jim glared at me. "They are coming for me, Ed. We will lure them into an ambush and kill them. My rival doesn't seem to understand technology as

well as I. We'll see how fearsome she is with a bullet in her brain.

I spent part of the day teaching them how to use the guns. Just the basics really. As I looked at their faces, it was pretty clear that none of them expected to survive whatever was coming. This was going to be Jim's final showdown. Some seemed willing to die for him. Others just seemed resigned to their fate. It was now 10 against whatever forces were coming for Jim.

I sent the others to do some target practice. I doubt that accuracy would be important in their battle. I just wanted to a chance to see Jim alone. So I made my way into the dimly lit basement. It was a mess, littered with scraps of clothes and other refuse. The stink of rotting meat hung in the air. I didn't dare wonder where the meat had come from.

"What are you doing here?" Jim's voice rasped from the darkness.

I hesitated. If he gave me what I asked for, I'd be sent back into a living hell. Was it what I really wanted? Was it any worse than what I was suffering right now?

Finally I said it. "I want out of the bargain. This isn't what I asked for."

Jim stepped into the light. He was the monster again, his huge head scraping the basement ceiling. You promised to serve me.

Now I was frightened. But what choice did I have? Yes, but you didn't tell me everything. You didn't tell me what I would become. You didn't tell me what this would lead to.

He stalked closer to me. "You didn't ask the right questions."

You should have told me. Do you realize that I beat a woman to death? My eyes watered. You should have told me that I would feel your hate. You should have told me that I would be your slave, thrall, or whatever the fuck you want to call it.

"Go back to the others," the demon growled. "My enemies draw near, and we haven't much time to prepare."

"I won't defend you, Jim." My heart skipped a beat as I said that. I can't fight for a liar, and I won't serve in your unjust war.

I never saw him move. I never saw the blow that sent me hurtling across the room. By the time I regained my senses the demon was standing over me, his claws suspended just inches from my face.

"You dare call me a liar, little man? You dare speak of unjust wars to someone who turned his back on God for your sake?"

Jim picked me up and slammed me into the ceiling before I could say anything.

"I did not deceive you in any way. Serve me now, and I will forgive you!" he growled.

"No," I gasped. "No. Do whatever the fuck you want to me. Cripple me. Kill me. I don't care anymore. I'd rather die than live one more second like this." It wasn't courage. It was surrender. I just wanted to die, and I didn't much care how it happened.

Instead, nothing happened. After several bone-chilling seconds, Jim let me go. I slumped to the ground and Jim changed. He seemed to shrink in on himself. In a moment, he was Big Jim again. His face was haggard, and there was a defeated look in his eyes.

"Get out," his voice held a kind of weary contempt. "Head east through the woods until you get to the highway. Sooner or later someone should give you a ride."

For a second, I couldn't move. Was he actually letting me go? Jim just stood there, glaring at me. I took one trembling step, then another. I still had my gifts. What was this? Mercy?

Or had I stumbled onto a secret about Jim and the others of his kind? He needs me as much as I need him, I thought. Son of a bitch.

The sun was shining, and the air smelled like snow when I stepped out into the farmyard. Jim's other soldiers stood around the porch, smoking, talking or cleaning their weapons. They looked at me curiously as I walked by, but I didn't see the point explaining what was going on. They'd made their choice to serve the demon. They'd have to come to their own terms with him.

I crossed a fallow field and stepped into the tree line. The sharp scent of pine filled my nostrils. Run, a voice said in the back of my mind. Just run. And I did. The cold air hurt my lungs, but the memory of the trees blurring past and the sound of my shoes beating a steady rhythm against the earth felt good. It felt like freedom.

I'd gone a couple of miles when there was a crash of thunder in the direction of the farmhouse, then two more in rapid succession. The sky above me was blue and clear. I picked up my pace. Soon I could hear the pop pop-pop of small arms fire. It looked like Jim's enemies were more on the ball than he imagined.

It sounded like Jim and his soldiers put up a hell of a fight. The shooting went on for almost five minutes. But then, just as I reached the opposite side of the forest and saw the highway just ahead, I learned just how bad off Jim was.

He reached into my head with desperate, scrabbling claws. I could feel how ruined his body was, how close the demon was to losing his grip on Jim's old bones. I could feel his fear, and for just a moment, I sensed the darkness that waited for him.

I felt the yawning blackness and knew what the bottom of that bleak pit felt like. Believe it or not, I felt sorry for poor Jim.

And then I was being turned inside out. The demon was taking me for everything I had, like a drowning man will pull his savior under for just a few more seconds of air. I knew it wouldn't be enough. Maybe Jim knew it, too.

SOLE SURVIVOR

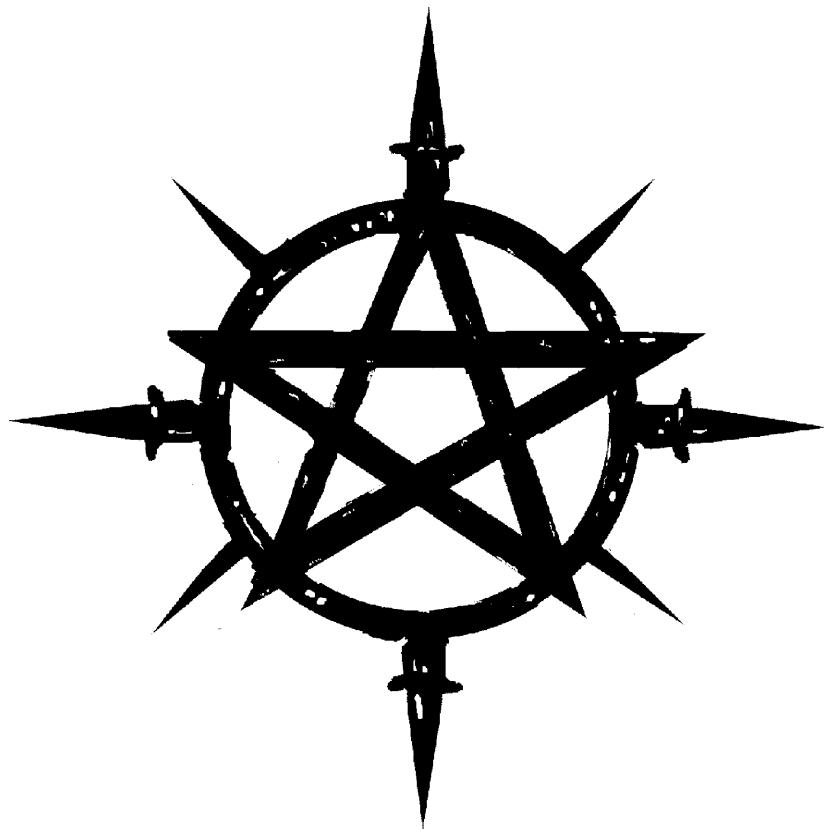
They say I only recently woke up from the coma. My old army wound is back, and I can no longer walk. My whole being has been taken away from me. I'm a shell of a person now. The only thing I do is write. I've been telling people what

happened. I hear the doctors saying they're going to lock me away in an institution. To tell you the truth, I probably belong there. What I did to that girl demands some kind of justice.

Some of you might say that I'm back where I started. I don't think so. To tell you the truth, I'm much better off now. I was trapped back then.

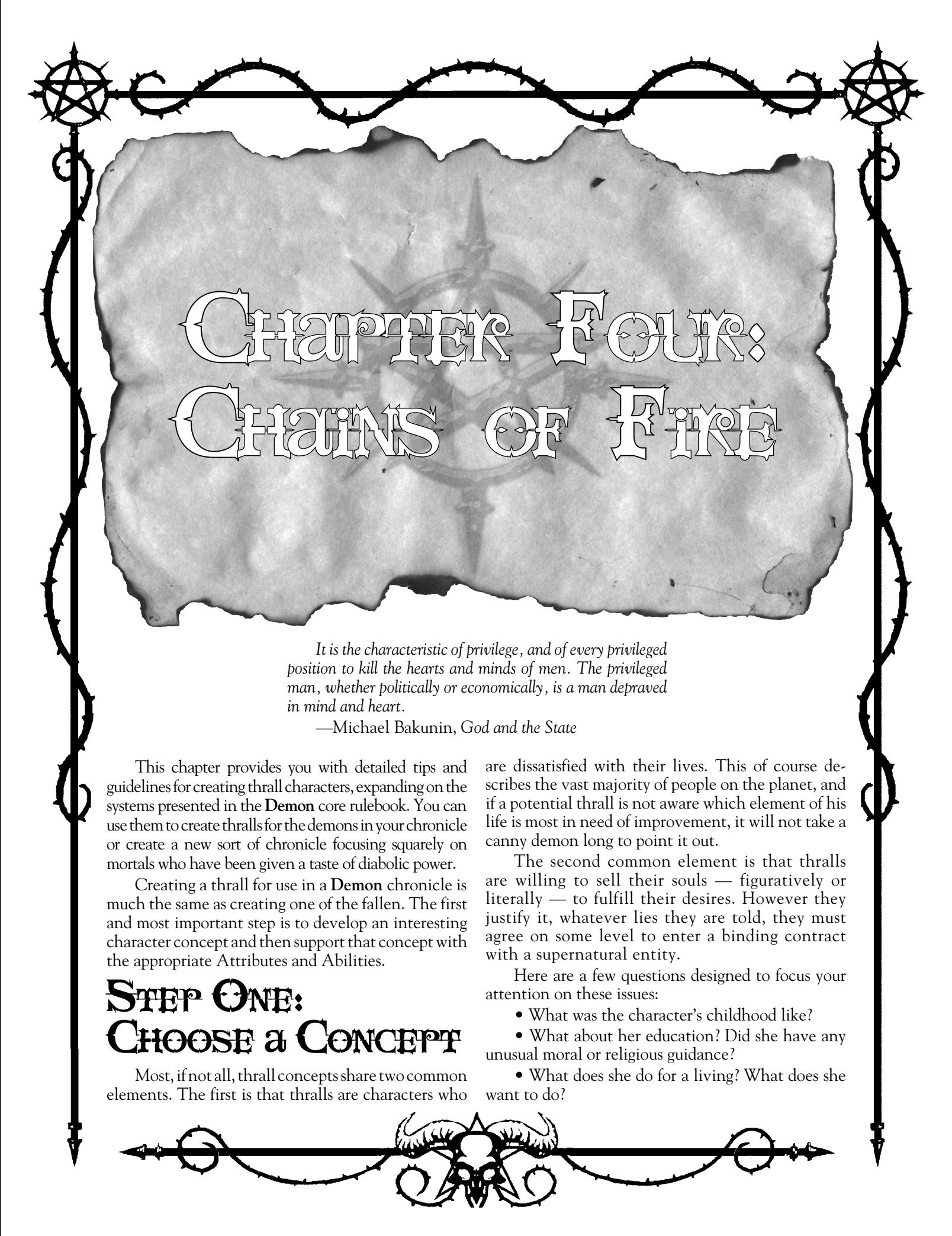
Trapped in the past. Trapped by my own expectations of myself. I blamed other people when they weren't to blame. I blamed a city when I should have blamed myself. That's all behind me now. I have the unconditional love of my family and I have my soul. What more could I want?

I'm free.





C Wilkins



CHAPTER FOUR: CHAINS OF FIRE

It is the characteristic of privilege, and of every privileged position to kill the hearts and minds of men. The privileged man, whether politically or economically, is a man depraved in mind and heart.

—Michael Bakunin, *God and the State*

This chapter provides you with detailed tips and guidelines for creating thrall characters, expanding on the systems presented in the **Demon** core rulebook. You can use them to create thralls for the demons in your chronicle or create a new sort of chronicle focusing squarely on mortals who have been given a taste of diabolic power.

Creating a thrall for use in a **Demon** chronicle is much the same as creating one of the fallen. The first and most important step is to develop an interesting character concept and then support that concept with the appropriate Attributes and Abilities.

STEP ONE: CHOOSE A CONCEPT

Most, if not all, thrall concepts share two common elements. The first is that thralls are characters who

are dissatisfied with their lives. This of course describes the vast majority of people on the planet, and if a potential thrall is not aware which element of his life is most in need of improvement, it will not take a canny demon long to point it out.

The second common element is that thralls are willing to sell their souls — figuratively or literally — to fulfill their desires. However they justify it, whatever lies they are told, they must agree on some level to enter a binding contract with a supernatural entity.

Here are a few questions designed to focus your attention on these issues:

- What was the character's childhood like?
- What about her education? Did she have any unusual moral or religious guidance?
- What does she do for a living? What does she want to do?

THRALL CHARACTER-CREATION PROCESS

- **Step One: Choose a Concept**

Choose concept, Nature and Demeanor.

- **Step Two: Choose Attributes**

Prioritize the three categories: Physical, Social and Mental (6/4/3). The character automatically has one dot in each Attribute.

- **Step Three: Choose Abilities**

Prioritize the three categories: Talents, Skills and Knowledges (11/7/4). The character does not start with any dots in any Abilities.

Choose Talents, Skills, Knowledges.

No Ability higher than 3 at this stage.

- **Step Four: Choose Advantages**

Choose Backgrounds (5) and rate Virtues (3).

The character automatically has one dot in each Virtue. Rate Faith potential (1) and Torment (0).

- **Step Five: Finishing Touches**

Record starting Willpower (equal to the sum of the two highest Virtues).

Spend freebie points (15). Abilities can be raised to 4 or 5 at this time. Purchase Merits and Flaws (optional).

- **Freebie Point Costs**

Attributes — 5 points per dot

Abilities — 2 points per dot

Backgrounds — 1 point per dot

Willpower — 1 point per dot

Faith potential — 7 points per dot

Virtues — 2 points per dot

- **Step Six: Dancing with the Devil**

Determine the effects of the pact the character makes with her demonic master.

- Where does she live? Is her home more of a sanctuary or a prison?

- What class of people does she live among or normally associate with? Is it by choice?

- Is she in love? Has she been? Does she have a partner? What sort of support does she give to, and receive from, the relationship?

- Is she on good terms with her family?

- What about her friends? Are they the fair-weather variety, or will they try to help her through the troubles ahead?

- Do any of the people in her life rely on her?

- What are her hobbies, predilections and vices?

- Whom does she most admire?

- Is she particularly proud or ashamed of any achievements in her life?

- What are her religious beliefs, and did the appearance of the demon change them at all?

- Had she already heard any rumors about the increased presence of demons in the world? How did she react?

NATURE AND DEMEANOR

Society does not treat people who wear their weaknesses on their sleeve with much kindness, so thralls are usually adept at hiding their true faces from the world. With this in mind, choose a Nature and Demeanor for your thrall character. The Nature is her true self — perhaps twisted by the hand fate has dealt her, or alternatively a solid core of normality buried beneath a veneer of loss. The Demeanor is the face she shows the world. You may

either choose any of the Nature and Demeanor Archetypes presented in Chapter Six of the *Demon* core rulebook or come up with your own. In addition, you may choose from the following three new Archetypes:

DAMNED SOUL

Whether or not damnation is literal, this character believes that she is destined for hellfire and eternal anguish. Either she has realized the consequences of her bargain or the appearance of the demon was a confirmation of previously held beliefs. Having no hope for the afterlife gives the Damned Soul a strange liberation from less urgent cares in this one. She will not lay her life down needlessly — she is beyond the suicidal stage — but if a sacrifice is called for, she probably won't see any reason why it shouldn't be her. In a sense, she is the ultimate martyr, but not out of care for others or even a lack of care for herself. She just goes through the motions of life, offering what help she can, as long as it is more diverting than lying in the road, weeping.

— Regain Willpower whenever your bleak viewpoint — not only of your own fate but that of the world around you — is justified by larger events.

NARCISSIST

The world revolves around a Narcissist. Any problem she sees around her — whether it's crashing airplanes, the return of demons or a jammed printer — is only a reflection of the pain she feels. When anything good happens, it is a direct result of her inner strength and ability to rally her spirits. Such might not be her literal belief, but it is likely

STEP THREE: CHOOSE ABILITIES

Once again, this step follows the same procedure described in Chapter Six of the **Demon** core rules. You get 11 dots to spend on primary Abilities, seven dots for secondary Abilities and four dots for tertiary Abilities. For more information on available Abilities, see pp. 140-153 of the **Demon** core rules.

STEP FOUR: CHOOSE ADVANTAGES

Although thralls have access to the same Advantages that demons do, the definition and cost of those Advantages is slightly different. Backgrounds change the least, and you have five points to purchase them as per usual (certain Backgrounds, such as Facts or Legacy are obviously unavailable). You must also allocate three extra dots among the character's Virtues, although these are not the pure versions of those qualities that demons possess. Lastly, determine the character's Faith potential, representing the strength of the character's beliefs.

BACKGROUNDS

Thralls have access to the same Backgrounds that demons do (pp. 153-158 in the **Demon** core rules), with the following exceptions:

Allies, Contacts, Fame, Followers, Influence, Mentor and Resources can be chosen as usual. The Mentor Background can represent the character's demon master (but see the new Attentive Master Background for a different approach), or it could be someone else entirely. You cannot purchase Eminence (again, Attentive Master provides a similar concept), Legacy, Pacts or Paragon.

In addition, you may also choose from the following two new Backgrounds:

ATTENTIVE MASTER

Alex felt the rough bricks of the wall pushing into her back as she tried to squirm away. "God damn it, you can't do this! Don't you know who I am?"

"You're nobody," the thug sneered.

"Wouldn't do that if I was you," a conversational voice said from behind him. The thug snarled and turned. Then he stopped, stared and ran.

Alex let herself slump down from the wall, onto her knees, keeping her eyes low. "Thank you, thank you," she

the way she reacts emotionally to the world. Likewise, she relates to other people only insofar as they make her look good, or at least confirm her self-image. Depending on the situation, a Narcissist could be a tireless dynamo of energy or mired in a morass of depression.

—Regain Willpower when others acknowledge your importance to a given problem or situation.

PROSELYTIZER

A Proselytizer is similar to a Pedagogue in that her principal desire is to share her knowledge with others. The ways in which she goes about that task is quite different, however. She is likely to be found shouting from street corners and addressing congregations. She is more interested in appealing to broad emotions than conveying well-reasoned detail, and although she will sometimes take on a teacher's role, she is far happier inspiring others to seek out the knowledge for themselves.

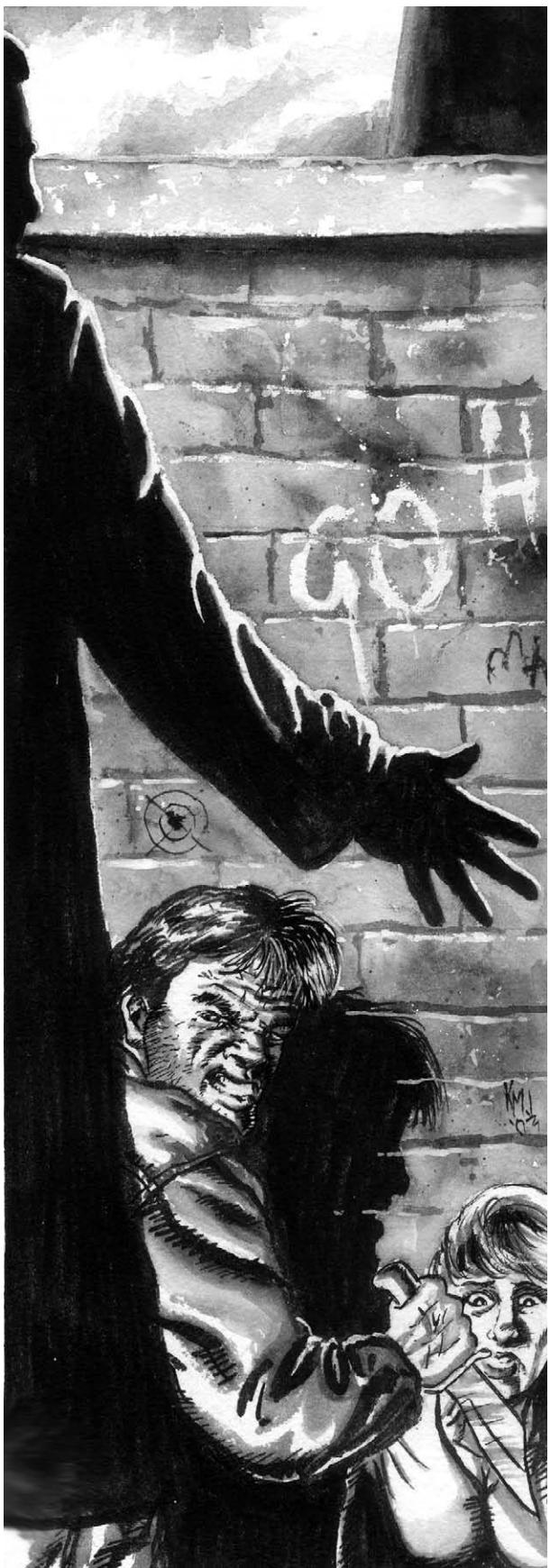
Of course, the nature of the "truth" that the Proselytizer preaches could be anything, from a belief in the healing power of angels to an ugly diatribe of race hatred.

—Regain Willpower whenever you convey some of your enthusiasm for your chosen subject to a number of onlookers.

STEP TWO: CHOOSE ATTRIBUTES

Thralls follow the same procedure of prioritizing and assigning Attributes as demons do, though they get fewer points to spend. The character's primary category receives six dots, the secondary category receives four dots, and the remaining category three dots. See Chapter Six of the **Demon** rulebook (pp. 136-140) for more details on this process.

Keep in mind that most of the character-creation process is about defining the character as she existed before accepting a pact with one of the fallen. Therefore, if the character has a particular flaw that will lead her to this fateful decision, that flaw should be reflected in the design process, right up to and including your freebie points. For example, if you have a character who is particularly clumsy in social situations, constantly making a fool of herself, she might barter her soul for increased Charisma and Manipulation. Your initial allocation of Attributes should reflect as much, with few dots allocated to those traits.



kept saying, trying to regain her composure. But when she looked up, the alley was empty.

For good or ill, you enjoy the close, personal attention of your infernal master. This Background represents how much energy he devotes to your well-being and the relative value he assigns to you in relation to his agenda. In addition, any Eminence your master has might also rub off on you if you have a high enough score in this Background. (Note, though, that some high-ranked demons have thralls whose identity they prefer to keep secret.)

You do not have to spend points in this Background if your master is being run by another player. Note that you can spend points here out of your initial allocation of five (which is an exception to the rule that character creation only reflects the demonic pact at a later step).

- X Your master has no interest in you at all. If you die, he'll just find someone else to draw Faith from.
- You are a resource, and not much more. Your master likely keeps an eye on you, if only to keep you away from his enemies.
- Your master takes active steps to keep you safe, and perhaps you have some access to him and his resources. He ravages you for Faith only when absolutely necessary.
- You are actively involved in the worship of your master, inspiring others to do the same. You keep a respectful distance, but you know he's looking out for you. If your master possesses high rank, lesser demons give you some deference if they realize whom you serve.
- Your master has a deep interest in keeping you alive and healthy, not only for your Faith but as a friend (or at least a treasured pet). Other demons treat you respectfully if they want to keep on your master's good side.
- You are a trusted servant, perhaps even an advisor to your master. In addition, his own rank in demon society gives you reflected prestige. You can convey his orders, screen his contacts and have lesser demons seek your favor.

EXPOSURE

Benjamin fell into the warmth of his mother's embrace. It had been many years since he'd done this, and as she stroked him soothingly, it was like finding home again.

"A demon," Benjamin said. "A demon. Its eyes were just..." He shuddered.

"Shhh," his mother said. "You have bargained with this creature?"

"No. Not yet. It is like a jabbel from your story. It will return, I think."

VIRTUES

The fallen were once the very embodiment of virtue, but very little of that is conveyed through the Faustian pact they share with their thralls. Whatever ethics or inner resources the thrall calls upon to survive the circumstances in which she finds herself are hers alone, born from human experience, her weaknesses and her aspirations. These three Virtues — Conscience, Conviction and Courage — represent a character's ability to resist the influence of her fallen master. Whether she is called upon to perform evil deeds in her master's name or she simply yields to the temptation to abuse her master's demonic gifts, the bond a thrall shares with her master has a corrosive effect on her psyche. Without a solid grip on her own sense of personal ethics and values, a thrall risks an inexorable slide into madness and depravity.

Each character starts out with one dot in each Virtue, and the player distributes three more dots among the Virtues. He might also use freebie points to increase them further. Virtues are important in helping determine the character's starting Willpower, so consider them carefully.

Unlike fallen characters, who use their Torment score to determine the degree to which they may act without requiring a Virtue roll (see the Hierarchy of Sins chart on p. 159 of the **Demon** core rulebook), thrall characters rely upon their Willpower as a similar gauge. See the revised hierarchy of sins for guidelines on the degree of sin that would require a Virtue roll for the character.

When the character commits a sin, roll a number of dice equal to the appropriate Virtue (difficulty 7). Willpower points may not be spent for automatic successes on this roll. If the roll succeeds, the character performs the deed without any lasting erosion of her sense of self. She might be horrified and guilt-ridden afterward, or she might devise elaborate rationalizations to explain the necessity of the act, but the result is that she gets through the experience with her soul more or less intact. If the roll fails, however, the character loses one point of temporary Willpower. The sin she's committed has eroded her inhibitions and sense of morality, making it easier to commit even worse acts in the future. If the roll botches, the character loses a permanent point of Willpower. Not only does she commit a sin that violates her long-held values, she enjoys it. The act reshapes her entire worldview, and it will take time and bitter experience to erase the stain from her soul.

"Then use your instincts, son. You need no finer tools."

Your encounter with the demon was not your first brush with the supernatural. Maybe you have seen magic performed — not parlor tricks but real, awe-inspiring manifestations of spirits and apparently diabolical beings. Perhaps you even took part in such rituals yourself. Or maybe your upbringing gave you a deeper understanding of the power of angels and demons than what you found in your average Sunday School lesson. Whatever the source of this knowledge is, you can use it to further understand what is happening to you under the influence of the Faustian pact, and perhaps find ways to combat or enhance it.

At certain times (as determined by the Storyteller), you can draw upon this prior experience to better understand the nature of your current situation. Calling upon these prior experiences requires a Wits + Exposure roll (difficulty 6). Having a high score in Exposure does not necessarily mean you also have a high Faith potential, although the two can be related, again depending upon the individual circumstances.

- X No previous contact. This all came as a great surprise.
- You accidentally stumbled onto some freaky shit once, but you got out fast.
- You have an abiding interest in the supernatural and have even performed your own white magic spells or rituals. So, maybe they didn't do anything that could persuade a skeptic, but you felt the potential for power.
- You have undertaken extensive religious training, including study of the theory and cases of demonic possession and manifestation. You didn't necessarily take it all literally, but you have some ideas of the tools to use when it all becomes real.
- You have witnessed the summoning of demons or the manifestation of other major supernatural powers. Perhaps you were an instigator, a victim or a third-party investigator. You saw a lot of what was happening, both in theory and in practice, and you have some idea of what worked and what didn't.
- You grew up in a culture where interaction with the supernatural was taken for granted. Although all those beliefs might not be quite correct, they give you a solid background for understanding and coping with your situation.

When a thrall's Willpower score drops to 3, she gains a temporary derangement, determined by the Storyteller. This derangement should be appropriate to the sin that caused the character's most recent Willpower loss, as the slow decline into depravity wears away at the thrall's sanity. When the character's Willpower drops to 2, she gains another derangement, and so on. When the thrall's Willpower reaches 0, her sanity and sense of self have been completely lost. Not only is she unable to function as a rational human being, she no longer provides her infernal master with any offered Faith. She will likely be institutionalized by family or friends, provided she doesn't injure or kill herself first. The character remains in this state until she regains at least one point of temporary Willpower. If she receives professional psychiatric treatment, roll one die per month of treatment with a difficulty of 10. If the roll succeeds, the character regains one point of temporary Willpower. If the roll fails, there is no further change to the character. If the roll results in a botch, the character's madness has become irreversible.

CONSCIENCE

This virtue represents your character's ability to grapple with the difficult questions posed by the

presence of demons and the age-old dilemma of evil within the human heart. Having a high Conscience score does not automatically mean that the character is opposed to demonic affairs, but she views any agenda — demonic, human or otherwise — with a critical eye, taking into account more than her own survival and self-interest. A character with a low Conscience score does not care about the larger picture, but only for what seems expedient. Alternatively, she might actually care for the principle of the matter but not have the foresight, concentration or patience to adapt her behavior appropriately to match her beliefs.

Make a Conscience roll when the character commits a sin that causes lasting harm to innocent or undeserving individuals. For example, using one's gifts to steal a car or following orders to kill a rival demon's thrall would call for a Conscience roll after the deed was done.

CONVICTION

For demons, Conviction is the measure of their belief in the underlying principles of Creation. For thralls, it is their conviction in their own worth, and more broadly in humanity's own worth, in the face of beings for whom Creation is a playground. A charac-

HIERARCHY OF SINS

Willpower	Sins
1	There is no sin. You're already damned, so why not do whatever you want?
2	Casual violation of others: murder for no reason, thoughtless cruelty and torture, near-mindless savagery.
3	Premeditated violation of others: plotted murder or assassination, systematic destruction of another, long-sought revenge.
4	Sins of passion: murder in a fit of rage, giving in to feelings of hate, anger, jealousy or irrational prejudice, or encouraging the same in others. Destroying particularly inspirational or meaningful objects. Doing personal harm through addiction or other self-destructive patterns of behavior.
5	Destruction of the works or properties of others without just cause. Inflicting intentional emotional harm through cruelty or neglect.
6	Accidental violations: Doing harm to others through carelessness, negligence or thoughtlessness. Neglecting duties or responsibilities. Betraying another's trust.
7	Theft or deception without just cause. Breaking your sworn word.
8	Doing harm (physical, emotional, or spiritual) to a mortal for any reason other than self-defense or the greater good.
9	Doing harm to any mortal creature for any reason other than self-defense or the greater good (a disrespect for the order of Creation). Permitting any lesser sin in your presence without at least trying to prevent it.
10	Any act of cruelty, selfishness or thoughtlessness. Allowing any such act in your presence without trying to prevent it. An unwillingness to sacrifice for the greater good.

ter with high a Conviction score has an innate understanding of humanity's relation to demons — that they are the source of power and meaning for the demons' existence. A low score, however, means that the character is more likely to feel that humanity may rightfully be enslaved by such resplendent beings. She has probably been so overwhelmed by her revelations that no other response occurs to her. Note that a character with a low Conviction score can still display pride in herself and her accomplishments, but it is only the pride of a trustee slave who wields borrowed power against her own peers.

Make a Conviction roll when the character is compelled to perform an act that violates her personal morals or ethics but doesn't cause lasting harm to others. This act can be one of expediency, such as using her infernal gifts to win promotion after promotion at work, or a service for her infernal master, such as providing him with her company's financial statements.

COURAGE

Courage is the strength of one's Conscience and Conviction, the ability to remain firm in the face of danger, fear or adversity. It includes bravery in the face of danger, but it's more than that. It's also the ability to withstand pain and hardship for the greater good or even to sacrifice oneself when necessary. Courageous characters can face nearly anything without flinching, and they have the ability to do what must be done, regardless of the consequences. While a high-Conscience character might know that an action is right, and a high-Conviction character knows that it is necessary, it takes courage to go out and *do* it, no matter how hard it is.

Make a Courage roll when the character attempts to defy her infernal master and fails, or her lack of resolve in a situation causes others to suffer. For example, if a thrall tries to stand up to her master's command to burn down a local clinic and the demon forces her to give in — either through simple persuasion, effective threats or a brute-force application of lore — a Courage roll would be required. Likewise, if a thrall uses her infernal gifts to avoid or escape a confrontation, leaving her friends to suffer in her place, a Courage roll would also be required.

FAITH POTENTIAL

As explained on p. 252 of the **Demon** core rules, each thrall has a Faith potential that indicates the strength of her beliefs and determines to what degree a demon can use that energy to fuel her own power or reshape the mortal's body and soul.

Faith potential is measured on a scale of 0 to 5. A score of 0 indicates someone completely divorced from his spiritual and emotional nature, in which case he is completely useless to a demon. Having five dots indicates a devotion to — and, much rarer, an intimate understanding of — higher ideals that almost completely subsumes the mortal's identity. Such individuals are possessed of an almost divine wisdom and grace, equal to the great saints of religious legend. On average, a typical mortal in the World of Darkness has a Faith potential of 1 or 2. All thralls start with a minimum of one dot.

When a Faustian pact is sealed, a thrall's Faith potential can be used in one of two ways. First, up to half the thrall's Faith potential (rounding up) can be claimed by the demon as a daily supply of offered Faith (see p. 250 of the **Demon** core rules for more details). Secondly, the demon can use some or all of the character's Faith potential to provide the thrall with enhanced physical or mental abilities, or even share limited versions of his own powers. The process of using Faith points to enhance a thrall is described in detail on pp. XX-XX.

A thrall character's Faith potential begins at 1, but the player can increase it by spending freebie points. Additionally, he can spend experience points to increase a character's Faith potential during play.

STEP FIVE: FINISHING TOUCHES

Determine the character's Willpower (equal to the sum of the two highest Virtues) and spend freebie points to increase any of the character's traits. If you are using the optional system for Merits and Flaws in your chronicle, they may also be purchased at this time.

WILLPOWER

Willpower is a measure of the character's self-control and determination. The initial rating is equal to the sum of her two highest Virtues, and it can be raised further by spending freebie points. If a Virtue is increased with freebie points, it also increases the character's Willpower score. Willpower can also be increased over the course of the chronicle by spending experience points.

Spending and regaining Willpower is the same for thralls as it is for demons (see p. 162 of the **Demon** core rulebook).

FREEBIE POINTS

Finally, you can customize your character by spending 15 freebie points, using the costs listed in the Freebie Point Costs chart on p. XX.

MERITS AND FLAWS

Merits and Flaws make up an optional set of traits that can help you fine-tune your character's appearance, capabilities and life history. Merits are advantages that are purchased with freebie points, while Flaws are disadvantages that provide extra freebie points that you can use to improve the character in other areas.

Thralls may purchase Physical, Social, Mental, Legal and Economic Merits and Flaws as described in Chapter Three of the **Demon Players Guide**. You may purchase as many Merits for your character as you have freebie points to spend, but you may not take more than seven points worth of Flaws.

STEP SIX: DANCING WITH THE DEVIL

Up to this point, the character-creation process has focused on establishing the character's traits as they were prior to entering into a Faustian pact. Finally, this step allows you to determine the effects of the pact made between your character and the dark powers with whom she is consorting. It contains options for deciding what enhancements the character can receive, giving you a lot of flexibility to better match your character concept.

THE PACT

Like the legendary wishes bestowed by the djinns, exact wording of a Faustian pact can be of crucial significance when determining the changes a thrall undergoes. If you are using the systems in this chapter to create a Storyteller character, you aren't required to be so stringent in tailoring the demon's gifts to fit the conditions of the pact. Simply set the terms and gifts as needed for the purposes of your story or chronicle, and you are done. If you are a player creating a thrall character for a **Demon** chronicle, however, you will want to work closely with the Storyteller to determine the exact effects of your character's pact.

The rules of a Faustian pact are deceptively simple: The demon must offer one or more supernatural gifts to a mortal in exchange for an offering

of Faith. The specific nature of these gifts is a matter of negotiation between demon and mortal, and the benefits the thrall ultimately receives depend as much on the good graces of the demon as on the negotiating skills of the would-be thrall. The pact is sealed once the mortal agrees to the gifts offered by the demon, so it is incumbent on the character to define the nature of the pact in as much detail as he deems sufficient. Unless the demon is motivated to enhance the mortal to suit the purposes of its own agenda, he will try to get away with spending as few Faith points on the mortal as he can get away with and claim the lion's share for himself. It is strongly encouraged that this sort of negotiation be worked out in play as much as possible, with the mortal matching wits with the fallen and attempting to gain the benefits she wants without the player being able to resort to game terms to do so. The thrall can't ask the demon for five dots in Strength or claws that inflict aggravated damage. Instead, she has to ask to be granted the strength to lift 500 pounds or the ability to persuade other mortals with the force of her charm. Then the Storyteller (or possibly another player) who plays the role of the demon must find a way to fulfill that request within the scope of the fallen character's abilities or renegotiate the terms of the pact. If both sides agree to the terms but the demon can't fulfill his part of the bargain, the pact is automatically broken.

Within the bounds of the terms set between demon and thrall, the mortal's Faith potential can be allocated in any way the demon sees fit. If the terms set by the mortal require every iota of Faith the character possesses and leave nothing for the demon, he will have to learn to sharpen his negotiating skills for next time. Of course, there is nothing to say that the demon *has* to claim part of the mortal's Faith potential for his own uses. He could use the entirety of a mortal's store of belief to transform her into the person she most wants to be—or into a highly useful agent that he can seek to control through other means of persuasion. Additionally nothing prevents the demon from granting *more* benefits than the terms of the pact requires, so long as the thrall has the Faith potential to permit it.

BASIC ENHANCEMENTS

Pages 252 and 253 of the **Demon** core rules explain the different types of powers that a demon can bestow upon a mortal. This section goes through the different options and explains them in more detail.

HEALING INJURIES OR ILLNESS

Chronic injuries or impairments can be healed at the cost of one point of Faith potential per illness or impairment. For example, a paraplegic war veteran who also suffers from posttraumatic stress disorder could be made whole again by using two points of the mortal's Faith potential — one point for the spinal injury and one point for the mental illness. As well as physical injuries, other types of damage — even emotional illness — can also be healed in this fashion. Heart defects, spinal injuries, cancer, Alzheimer's — virtually any crippling physical or mental impairment can be healed in this fashion at the Storyteller's discretion. Alternatively, the demon can bestow his resistance to illness and aging by using one point of the thrall's Faith potential. If the pact between demon and mortal is broken, any injuries or other impairments healed in this fashion immediately return.

INCREASED ATTRIBUTES

Additional Attribute dots may be purchased at the rate of two dots per point of Faith potential and allocated as per the terms of the thrall's Faustian pact. The person whose fallen character is responsible for the pact assigns these additional dots as needed, though the Storyteller is the final arbiter in the case of any disputes. No Attribute may be raised higher than 5.

INCREASED ABILITIES

Up to five dots of Abilities may be purchased at the cost of a single point of Faith potential. This expenditure may be used to increase existing Abilities or gain new ones as mandated by the thrall's Faustian pact. Again, the person whose fallen character is responsible for the pact assigns these additional dots as needed, though the Storyteller is the final arbiter in the case of any disputes. If an Ability rises to 4 or higher, a specialty can be declared for that Ability, though it must be in keeping with the nature of the pact. For example, Dhargir, a Devourer, encounters a novice hiker lost in the forest and offers to help her survive in exchange for her Faith. The hiker agrees, and Dhargir uses one point of the hiker's Faith potential to grant her Survival 5. Doing so allows a specialty to be declared for that Ability, and due to the nature of the pact, the Storyteller deems it appropriate that the character receives a specialty in forest survival.

Increased Abilities are represented as an intuitive grasp of the concepts and theories involved in the relevant body of knowledge. A thrall with an

increased Medicine Ability doesn't suddenly gain extra knowledge she didn't have before. Instead she has a deeper insight into the concepts and methods involved that improves her capabilities in turn.

INNATE POWERS

A demon can bestow a limited version of one or more of her innate powers upon a mortal, at the cost of one point of Faith potential per innate power. Each innate power costs the thrall one Willpower point to use for the duration of a single scene. Also, please note the following changes or restrictions:

- **Resisting damage while in apocalyptic form:** Thralls do not have an apocalyptic form, but they can still possess a costly version of this power that requires two points of Willpower to activate for a single scene.

- **Supernatural Awareness:** Thralls use their total Faith potential to determine the range of this enhancement.

- **Invocations:** A thrall cannot be invoked by name as a demon can, regardless of how the demon enhances him.

APOCALYPTIC ENHANCEMENTS

Demons can bestow a limited version of one or more of their apocalyptic form enhancements upon a mortal, at the cost of one enhancement per point of Faith potential. Each enhancement costs the thrall one Willpower point to use for the duration of a single scene. If a demon wishes to bestow a high-Torment enhancement on a mortal (such as the Kishar form's Spikes or Ichor) she gains a temporary Torment point for each high-Torment enhancement she bestows.

EVOCATIONS

A demon can bestow a limited version of one or more of her evocations upon a mortal, at a cost in Faith potential equal to the level of the evocation. Therefore, Mold Earth (Lore of the Earth •••) would cost three points of a thrall's Faith potential. A Willpower roll (difficulty 8) is made when the thrall attempts to perform the evocation, with the number of successes determining the scope and effect of the evocation, as normal. The thrall is allowed to perform the high-Torment version of any evocation she knows, but the player must make a Virtue roll immediately thereafter.

TAILORED ENHANCEMENTS

Demons are not constrained to the basic enhancements detailed in the previous section. The fallen can also bestow specific, tailored enhance-

ments that relate to the Celestial realms specific to their House. Usually this technique is more effective, because such flexibility means that they are likely to be able to find just the right thing that will satisfy the mortal in question. Often what one person will see as essential, most other people will see as no more than a parlor trick of dubious value.

This section contains examples of such enhancements, arranged by House. Each costs one point of Faith potential, and they do not require Willpower points to use. You are encouraged to design your own tailored enhancements that may be more appropriate for your character's pact.

DEFILERS

The following are examples of tailored enhancements typical of the Lammasu:

Immunity to Poison: The thrall's body is immune to the effects of any poison, including alcohol, nicotine or fatigue poisons.

Pressure Resistance: The thrall's body is immune to effects of high or low pressure when diving to great depths or ascending to high altitudes.

Predict Weather: With a successful Perception + Science roll (difficulty 7), the thrall can accurately predict weather patterns up to 48 hours in advance.

Social Currents: This enhancement allows a thrall to enter a room and gain an immediate sense of the social undercurrents at play among the people within. Roll Perception + Alertness (difficulty 7); the number of successes gained determines the depth and detail of the information gained. One success might reveal who has strong emotions toward whom (love, hate, etc.). Two successes might reveal the relative positions of authority and influence among the gathered crowd — who the dominant personalities are, who feels loyal to whom, etc. Three successes might reveal subtler clues such as subliminal communications between individuals — the meaning of a knowing look or an enigmatic smile.

Warp Tattoo: This power allows the thrall to create and control tattoos that cover her body, allowing them to move — including changing shape, color and size — at will.

DEVILS

The following are examples of tailored enhancements typical of the Namaru:

Detect Demons: The thrall can automatically detect the presence and approximate location of any demon within a radius of 10 yards times the character's Faith potential.

Detect Lies: When a mortal or demon lies to the thrall (including her infernal master) the Storyteller

can make a reflexive Perception + Alertness roll (difficulty 7) for the character to detect the falsehood.

Mark of Armistice: This power marks your character in much the same way as demons can brand their enemies, although with far more beneficial results. Mortals cannot attack the thrall unless a successful Willpower roll (difficulty 7) is made, unless said mortals are acting in self-defense.

Remember Names: This power gives your character the ability to bring to mind any name she has previously known. It's very useful for an employer of a lot of workers — not only so she can address each of them, but inquire after their family as well — but historians and other researchers can also benefit immeasurably.

Resist Heat: This gift gives the thrall the ability to soak fire damage with her Stamina (no activation roll required). This enhancement does not affect supernatural flames, such as those created by the Lore of Flame or the Visage of Flame.

DEVOURERS

The following are examples of tailored enhancements typical of the Rabisu:

Animal Empathy: This enhancement reduces the difficulty of all Animal Ken rolls by two.

Animal Senses: The Devourer can bestow the senses of a particular animal onto his thrall. The thrall can gain a dog's sense of smell, an owl's night vision or a snake's ability to sense body heat, for example.

Feel No Pain: The thrall's pain receptors are substantially dulled, allowing her to remain functional in the face of agonizing pain. Halve any wound modifiers the character suffers (rounding down).

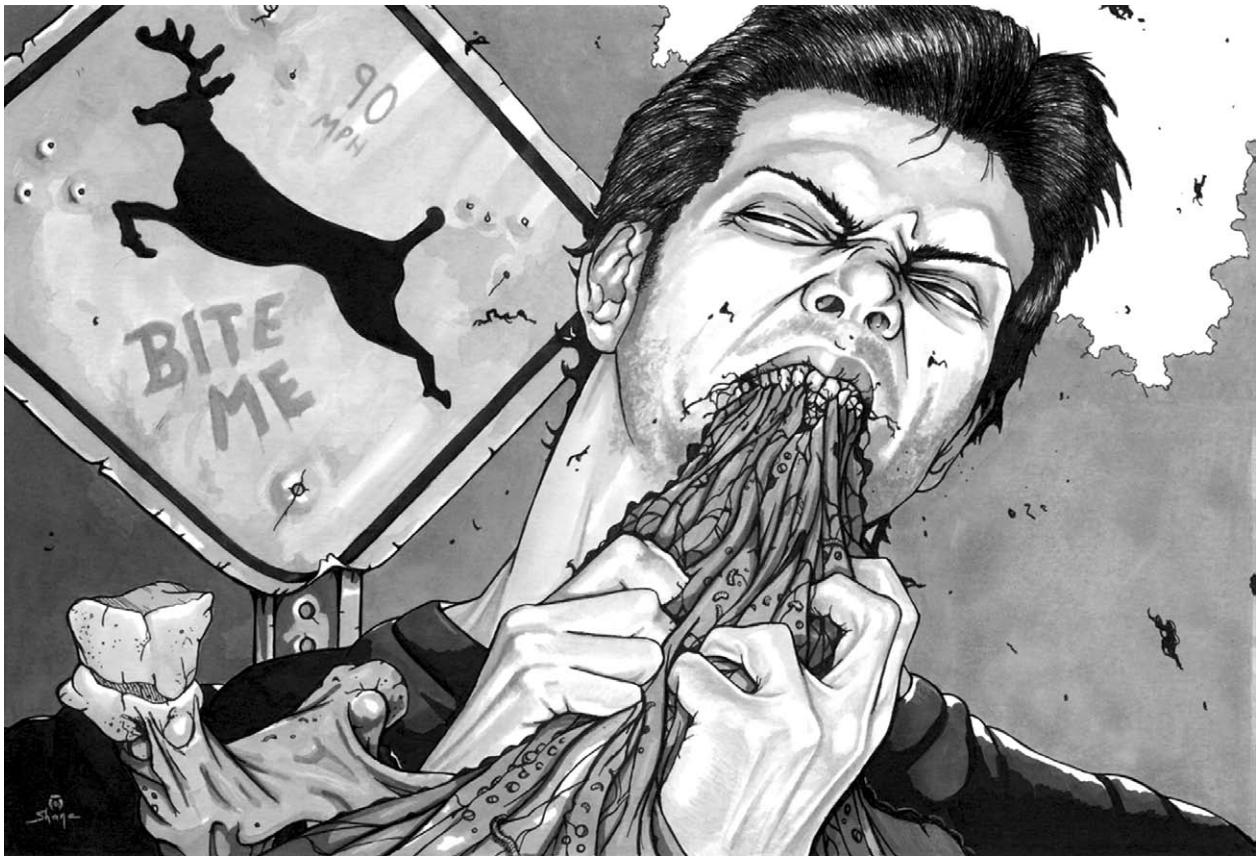
Resilient Metabolism: The thrall is capable of deriving nourishment from food sources that would kill a starving rat. As long as the material is organic — anything from spoiled meat to cardboard — the character can eat it and survive.

Sense Emotion: The thrall can sense subtle cues in a mortal's voice, blood pressure and body heat levels that reveal the person's emotional state. Roll Perception + Alertness (difficulty 6); one success is enough to inform the thrall of the target's current level of emotion. This enhancement is useful for thralls whose line of work requires the occasional interrogation.

FIENDS

The following are examples of tailored enhancements typical of the Neberu:

Chaos Sight: Although it is useful for a number of applications, this power is traditionally used by



gamblers to stack the odds in their favor. To accurately predict the result of a single random event, roll Perception + Intuition (difficulty 9). The Storyteller should usually make this roll in secret.

Danger Sense: The thrall cannot be ambushed or otherwise taken by surprise. Roll Perception + Alertness (difficulty 6) when the character is threatened with bodily harm. One success warns the character that she is in imminent danger. Two successes reveal to the character where the danger is coming from. Three or more successes reveal to the character the exact nature of the danger.

Manipulate Current: This enhancement allows the thrall to affect electrical current, stopping or starting the flow within particular wires. Roll Dexterity + Technology (difficulty 7). One success means your character can affect a wire she is touching directly. Additional successes allow her to affect the current as long as she is touching some part of the machinery and has a rough idea of how it works. For example, she could stop or start a car's ignition by touching the hood or defuse a bomb without knowing precisely which wire to cut. A botch would overload the wiring (or blow up the bomb). Note that manipulation of this power is not fine enough to affect the working of circuit boards (let alone computer chips),

but such items might short-circuit or burn out with a few wayward volts.

Low-Light Vision: This enhancement allows the thrall to see clearly in near-total darkness as long as there is at least a weak source of light — even a match-flame is sufficient to allow the character to see as clearly as if she were in bright sunlight.

Fortune's Friend: This enhancement tilts the forces of probability in the thrall's favor, such that she always catches a lucky break when she needs it. Once per scene, the character automatically succeeds at a single task, no matter how improbable it is. For system purposes, the character is considered to have gained a single success on any given roll in a single scene.

MALEFACTORS

The following are examples of tailored enhancements typical of the Annunaki:

Detect Forgery: The thrall can immediately discern if an item is a forgery by holding it in her hands and studying it for the space of a turn (no roll required).

Location Sense: The thrall knows precisely where she is at all times (no roll required), and she can estimate the distance to anything she can see with great accuracy (using Perception + Alertness).

Machine Sense: The thrall is able to repair any mechanical device with a few deft adjustments (or sometimes a swift kick). Roll Perception + Technology (difficulty 7). One success means that the device will continue to function for the duration of the scene. Two successes mean that it will continue to function for the remainder of the day. Three or more successes mean that the device is permanently repaired.

Mineral Sense: The thrall gains the ability to detect mineral deposits and natural resources including oil. The character must be able to touch the surface of the earth in the area he's surveying. Roll Perception + Science — the difficulty depends on the size of the deposit being sought. A pocket of gemstones might have a difficulty of 8, a vein of ore might have a difficulty of 7, while a large pocket of oil might have a difficulty of 6. The range of the enhancement is 100 feet times the character's Faith potential.

Sure Footing: Related to the evocation Earth Meld (Lore of the Earth •), this enhancement gives the thrall the ability to keep his footing in treacherous conditions. As long as he is not trying anything too acrobatic, or doesn't have people trying to knock her down, no roll is required. For more challenging actions (such as running across a street in the middle of an earthquake), roll Dexterity + Survival (difficulty 6).

SCOURGES

The following are examples of tailored enhancements typical of the Asharu:

Oxygen Saturation: The thrall is able to function on a third as much oxygen as a normal mortal is. She is capable of holding her breath three times as long as a typical human can, affecting her resistance to harmful gases, her ability to survive drowning, et cetera.

Resuscitate: This enhancement allows the thrall to resuscitate someone who is clinically dead. Make a Willpower roll (difficulty 8). One success allows her to resuscitate a dead body within one minute of its death. Two successes allow the character to resuscitate a dead body within two minutes of its death, and so on. As well as restoring the soul, the body is healed just enough to maintain life for at least another hour. In effect, it restores one health level of damage. Resuscitate may be performed only once on any given body — if the roll fails, the body is beyond resuscitation.

360° Vision: By concentrating, the thrall is able to perceive her entire surroundings at once. Roll

Perception + Alertness (difficulty 6) each time the character attempts to use this enhancement.

Perfect Pitch: The thrall is able to sing with perfect clarity, hitting just the right note every time. With a successful Intelligence + Performance roll (difficulty 6), she can shatter glass.

Acute Hearing: The thrall gains supernaturally acute hearing, reducing the difficulty of all Perception rolls involving sound by two.

SLAYERS

The following are examples of tailored enhancements typical of the Halaku:

Clairvoyance: This enhancement allows the thrall to become a conduit for the spirits of the dead. This enhancement can be used to contact a specific spirit or to allow local spirits to speak through the thrall. If the thrall wants to channel a specific spirit, she must know the spirit's name. Roll Manipulation + Awareness (difficulty 6). If the roll is successful, the spirit is drawn to the thrall and is able to see, hear and speak through the character's body. If the thrall is simply opening herself to any spirit in the vicinity, the difficulty of the roll increases to 8. The duration of the clairvoyant episode lasts for a number of turns equal to the character's Faith potential. At the end of the episode, the thrall suffers one health level of bashing damage. This damage cannot be soaked.

Cling to Life: This ability allows the thrall to resist death even when her body has been mortally injured. At the moment of the thrall's death, roll a number of dice equal to the thrall's Willpower. Each success allows the thrall to remain alive for one hour. The thrall will survive if she receives medical attention within this period of time, otherwise she dies once her extended life span has expired. The thrall is considered Incapacitated for the duration of this period, and her vital signs are so faint that anyone rolling to attempt to physically discern her condition adds two to the difficulty.

Sense Spirits: The thrall can automatically detect the presence of spirits within a radius of 10 yards times the character's Faith potential.

Soldier On: This enhancement allows a thrall to partially ignore the pain and impairment she suffers from her injuries. Make a Willpower roll (difficulty 8). Each success reduces the character's wound penalty by one. The effect lasts for one scene.

Speak with Loved One: The thrall learns a short ceremony with which she can contact a deceased blood relation of her choice. The relative (assuming his spirit still exists in the shadow lands) is not

EXPERIENCE

Thrall characters created for play in a Demon chronicle benefit from hard-won experience just as readily as the fallen do. The Storyteller has final approval on any use of experience to improve character traits or acquire new traits. Such improvement usually requires more than just spending experience points. It also requires the character to undergo training or practice enough to warrant the increase, and the Storyteller may place additional requirements on the character. Increasing a character's Faith potential, for example, could require a series of encounters or activities that greatly broaden the character's understanding of the pact she's forged with her demonic master, as well as a greater understanding of the fallen in general.

Characters' traits generally should not improve by more than one dot per story, unless the story takes place over a long period of time. It takes time to make significant improvements.

Trait	Cost
New Ability	3
Attribute	current rating x 4
Ability	current rating x 2
Background	current rating x 3
Virtue	current rating x 2*
Willpower	current rating
Faith potential	current rating x 10

*Increasing a Virtue does not increase Willpower after character creation.

coerced into replying, but if he wishes to, he can speak through the thrall's body for up to 10 minutes. The ceremony works on only one spirit, and it can be used only once per day.

DESIGNING TAILORED ENHANCEMENTS

The following are some basic guidelines to follow when designing your own tailored enhancements. As always, our Golden Rule applies: Use what works best for your chronicle and discard the rest.

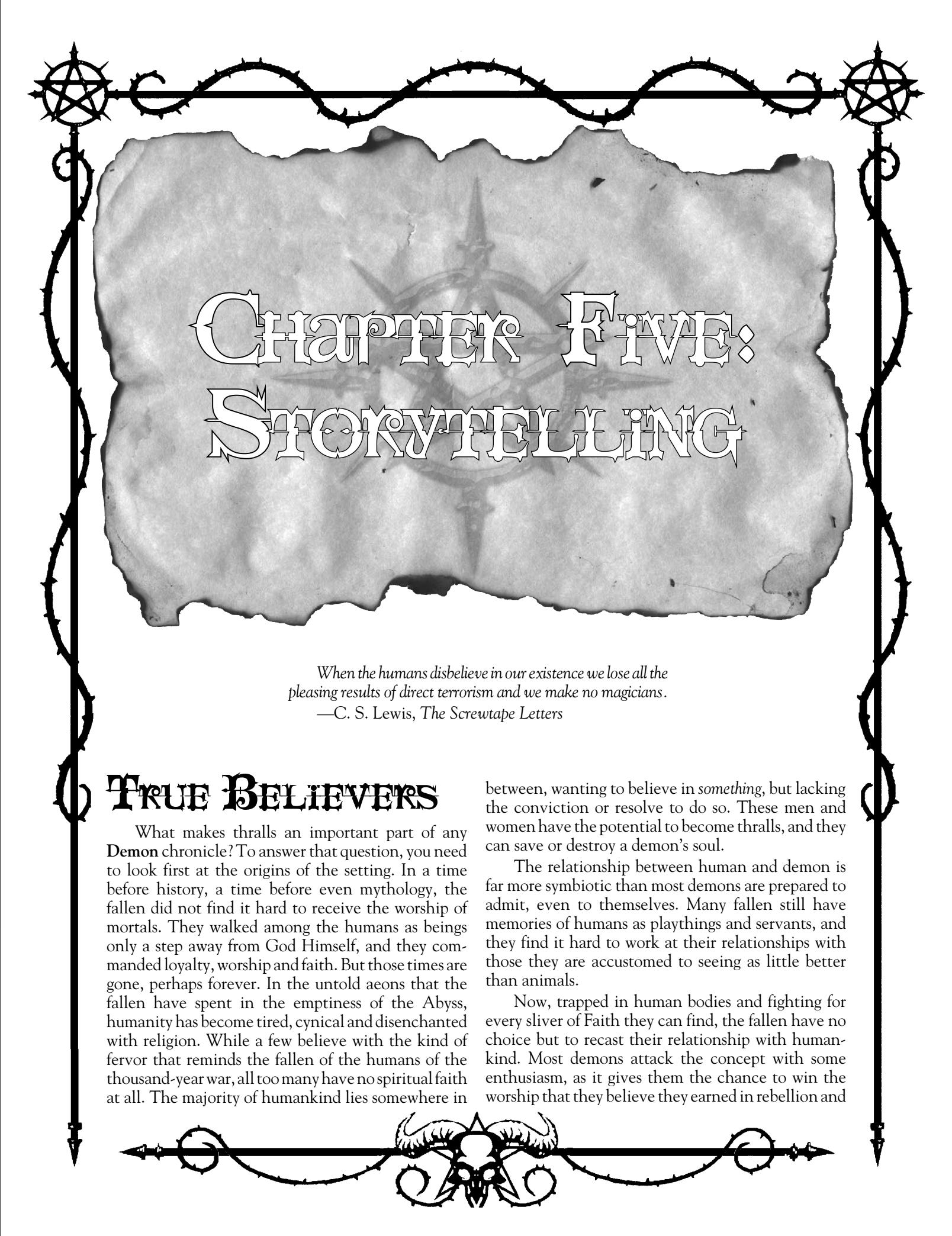
- **Keep it personal.** An enhancement should be limited to the thrall only. She can't summon thunderstorms or cause cracks to open in the earth. If she has an enhancement that allows her to affect others, it should be reflected through a personal quality such as a hypnotic voice or piercing gaze.

- **Keep it limited.** The more powerful or far-reaching the enhancement is, the less often it can be used. An enhancement that allows the character to detect lies could be used as often as the character likes, while one that allows her to bring back the dead should allow only one attempt per corpse, period.

- **Keep range and radius of effect limited to the character's Faith potential.** Range or radius of effect should be measured in 10-yard to 100-yard increments multiplied by the thrall's Faith potential.

- **Keep the enhancement appropriate to the demon's House.** Devourers shouldn't be providing thralls with the ability to predict the weather, nor should Scourges bestow the ability to communicate with animals.





CHAPTER FIVE: STORYTELLING

When the humans disbelieve in our existence we lose all the pleasing results of direct terrorism and we make no magicians.

—C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*

TRUE BELIEVERS

What makes thralls an important part of any Demon chronicle? To answer that question, you need to look first at the origins of the setting. In a time before history, a time before even mythology, the fallen did not find it hard to receive the worship of mortals. They walked among the humans as beings only a step away from God Himself, and they commanded loyalty, worship and faith. But those times are gone, perhaps forever. In the untold aeons that the fallen have spent in the emptiness of the Abyss, humanity has become tired, cynical and disenchanted with religion. While a few believe with the kind of fervor that reminds the fallen of the humans of the thousand-year war, all too many have no spiritual faith at all. The majority of humankind lies somewhere in

between, wanting to believe in *something*, but lacking the conviction or resolve to do so. These men and women have the potential to become thralls, and they can save or destroy a demon's soul.

The relationship between human and demon is far more symbiotic than most demons are prepared to admit, even to themselves. Many fallen still have memories of humans as playthings and servants, and they find it hard to work at their relationships with those they are accustomed to seeing as little better than animals.

Now, trapped in human bodies and fighting for every sliver of Faith they can find, the fallen have no choice but to recast their relationship with humankind. Most demons attack the concept with some enthusiasm, as it gives them the chance to win the worship that they believe they earned in rebellion and

have been deprived of through their agonizing imprisonment in the Abyss. The rush of power they feel when a thrall offers them Faith gives them a brief taste of their glorious existence in the days before their defeat and incarceration.

It's your task as the Storyteller to make this process as entertaining for everyone in your game as you can. This chapter discusses all the key ideas you need to bear in mind through the various stages of the demon-thrall relationship.

And yes, this chapter is very much for the Storyteller's use alone. We politely ask players to stop here, for the sake of their own enjoyment of the game. There are no great secrets of the setting buried in these pages, but there's plenty of help and advice for the Storyteller that you'll enjoy much more from her lips than the pages of this book.

SEDUCTION

Nowhere are the challenges of a relationship between the fallen and their former charges more evident than in the process of seducing a thrall, and it's incumbent on you to bring the potential thralls to life in a way that makes this conflict clear to the members of your troupe. How do you set about doing that?

CHOOSING A THRALL

For beings who are effectively immortal, few demons have the time to try picking random strangers off the street in the hope of making them thralls. What is more, only a small proportion of humanity has enough capacity for real, fervent belief to make them worthwhile thralls.

Most potential thralls share two main characteristics: a capacity for belief in something greater than themselves, and a vulnerability that the demon can exploit to form a Faustian bond.

BELIEF

The capacity for faith is the single most important quality a thrall possesses, yet it is one of the hardest to quantify. What constitutes a capacity for faith? Breaking it down to its most elemental level, faith is the capacity to believe in a concept or idea regardless of — or in opposition to — any physical evidence. As you can see, this description casts a broad net in terms of who and what a potential thrall can place her faith in. Religious beliefs are classic examples of mortal faith, and the basis of many demonic pacts, but higher belief can also be found in a variety of other areas of human experience. For example:

- **Philosophy.** In some ways the opposite of religion, philosophy takes a more secular approach to the human condition. Yet men and women who are committed to a particular philosophy, or the general search for philosophical truth are just as capable of fervent, passionate belief as any priest or saint. A mortal who fervently believes in moral relativism, for example, would be particularly easy pickings for a clever demon.

- **Ideology.** When the Bolshevik Revolution swept through Russia at the beginning of the 20th century, Communism became the new religion of the Soviet Union. Recent history is replete with examples of political ideology that has been embraced (or forced upon) societies with all the intensity and devotion that religions once demanded. Modern political parties of all stripes have their share of zealots that the fallen can exploit.

- **Science.** The time is long past when society as a whole believed that science could solve all of humanity's problems. Yet many idealists, particularly in the medical field, still believe that their efforts can change the world for the better. A neurosurgeon who thinks of himself as one step removed from God is a prime source of faith, even if the faith is largely directed at himself. The same can be said for an archaeologist who is convinced that science holds the key to unlocking the origin of humanity, or the engineer who believes that science is mankind's only hope of survival in an increasingly poisoned world.

- **Celebrity.** Although it sounds transitory and superficial, many men and women are still enraptured by the world of movies, television and books. In a very real sense, these fans idolize their favorite celebrities, and for a few, their obsession takes on a sort of religious fervor. Shrines to actors or their characters are common on the Internet, and many fans set aside parts of their houses as a display of devotion, presenting collections of autographs, pictures and other memorabilia. An obsessive fan's desire to be part of his idol's world is not much different from a penitent's desire to enter Heaven, which is something a demon can well understand.

As you can see, many potential sources of inspiration for human belief exist, some as mundane as a basic faith in human nature or as bizarre as the conviction that Earth is being visited by aliens. The focus of belief isn't as important as its intensity — real faith is measured by the degree of devotion a mortal places upon her beliefs. A person who is prepared to sell off all her possessions and travel to the desert for a rendezvous with humanity's alien

mentors is just as strong a source of faith as the priest who has devoted his entire life to his church. This intensity of belief is what sets potential thralls apart from the rest of mankind.

VULNERABILITY

The second quality that separates potential thralls from the rest of humanity is a personal vulnerability on which a demon can bring her powers to bear. Vulnerability can be defined in this context as a moral or ethical weakness in the character's personality, an overriding ambition or desire or a tangible, physical defect that separates her from her peers.

Examples of moral or ethical weaknesses include:

- **Hate.** The character has a deep and abiding hatred of a person, group or organization, and he would give anything to be able to "give them what they deserve."
- **Greed.** The character doesn't just want to be wealthy, she wants to be wealthier than anyone else. Whether poverty-stricken or already somewhat rich, she would give anything to have more.
- **Jealousy.** The character is consumed with envy of a person, group or organization. Perhaps a co-worker got a plum promotion or a particular group enjoys social privileges that the character doesn't. She wants her "fair share," or if she can't have it, then neither should they.

• **Spite.** The character remembers every insult, every slight, no matter how insignificant, and she is driven by the desire to get back at each and every person or group that wronged her. She would give anything to be able to see "justice" done.

Examples of overriding ambition or desire include:

- **Political or corporate ambition.** The character is consumed with the drive to climb the corporate ladder or win her way into the highest elected offices of the country, but she lacks the personal charisma or resources to do so.

• **Artistic success.** The character wants to be an accomplished actor, writer, painter, etc., but she lacks the necessary talent to achieve the heights of her artistic calling.

• **Academic success.** The character is a student or scholar who wants to excel in her studies but lacks the intelligence or drive to attain her goals.

• **Athletic success.** The character is driven to achieve athletic excellence. Perhaps she wants a lucrative professional sports contract or craves Olympic gold, but she doesn't have the strength, speed or endurance to rise above her competitors.

• **Celebrity.** The character craves the fame and status that comes with being a celebrity — all she needs is a way to gain and keep the public's attention.

DETERMINING FAITH POTENTIAL

A thrall's Faith potential is a reflection of the strength of her devotion to a particular belief, be it religious or otherwise. This potential varies from individual to individual, and it is often hard to quantify. (How do you put a value to an intangible quality?) One rule of thumb that you can use is to consider how much the character is willing to risk or sacrifice for the sake of her beliefs:

0 Faith potential: The character would never consider risking her comfort or her possessions for the sake of an idea or belief.

1 Faith potential: The character would be willing to accept trivial discomforts (such as getting up early to go to church once a week or taking time out from work to go vote). She would donate wealth or possessions she has in excess (e.g., she would donate old cans from the back of her pantry for a food drive or give a dollar she found on the street to the Salvation Army) for the sake of her beliefs.

2 Faith potential: The character would be willing to accept small discomforts (such as attending midnight peace vigils or going to political rallies). She would donate small amounts of her personal wealth (e.g., monthly contributions to United Way or regular tithes to the church) for the sake of her beliefs.

3 Faith potential: The character would be willing to accept significant discomfort (such as traveling across country to join a peace protest or allowing herself to be arrested at a sit-in). She would donate a significant portion of her personal wealth (e.g., any personal possessions she doesn't absolutely need; any amount of money in excess of her basic needs) for the sake of her beliefs.

4 Faith potential: The character would be willing to accept profound discomfort (e.g., imprisonment and torture) or sacrifice virtually all of her possessions for the sake of her beliefs.

5 Faith potential: The character is ready and willing to die for what she believes in. She is willing to give anything she possesses to the cause, even if it means a risk to her health and well being.

• **Love.** The character might harbor an unrequited love for a co-worker, dream of reviving the love in a failed marriage or simply believe that something in her has to change in order to become worthy of someone's love.

• **Courage.** The character might be crippled by insecurity or outright fear when it comes to dealing with society. If she were just bold enough, confident enough or witty enough, she could get anything she wanted.

Examples of physical defects include:

• **Birth defects.** The character might have been born blind or deaf, or he might suffer a congenital heart defect or other crippling impairment that limits his ability to interact with society.

• **Crippling injuries.** The character might have been paralyzed in a car accident, lost a limb or suffered permanent nerve damage that prevents her from enjoying the life she once led.

• **Disfiguring injuries.** The character was permanently disfigured by an accident or crime in a way that profoundly affects her relationships with people.

• **Terminal disease.** The character could be suffering from cancer, AIDS or some other incurable medical condition that will prematurely end her life.

• **Perceived defects.** The character believes that she isn't strong enough/ smart enough/ beautiful enough to have a happy life, even though there's nothing really wrong with her.

INTRODUCING POTENTIAL THRALLS

Once you've created potential thralls for your chronicle's characters to encounter, you need to give some thought as to how the demons are likely to encounter them. Your troupe will probably take one of two courses. They might go looking for thralls, in which case your task is to seed a number of clues over the course of a story that leads the characters to the potential thralls. On the other hand, you can present the potential thralls to the demons in the course of their "normal" lives which, in a sense, reverses the normal temptation position, especially if your game's characters have a philosophical aversion to making thralls. Let's look at each of those options in turn.

Looking for thralls should be a time-consuming effort for the characters. It should also be feasible, however, so you need to have two or three ideas of ways that the demon could stumble across your prepared potential thrall.



While demons are certainly attuned to a feeling of Faith around them, it's not as simple as walking down the street until they "feel" someone with the right potential, although your troupe might well try it. A more effective tactic would be for the characters to insinuate themselves into communities where people with the potential for faith can be found. Such a community can be anything from a religious congregation — which carries the risk of exposing the demon to potential exorcists — to a self-help group run by a charismatic leader to a long-running theater production with a large cast and crew. Once they have become a part of such a dynamic community, the characters must simply open themselves to events that reveal the vulnerabilities of their newfound friends and co-workers.

Seeking potential thralls through the relationships provided by the demon's host is even easier. Most fallen characters retain some degree of connection with their mortal lives: It's one of the things that stabilize them against the dangers of rising Torment. The characters might have business or employment commitments that lead them to meet new people on a regular basis. What's trickier is getting the thrall in a position where he could open up to the demon. The key to doing so is putting him in a position where the demon has to interact with him in some way — as a business contact, a boyfriend of the character's child or as an employee of the character, for example. He might even be someone whom the character encounters as part of the main, but unrelated, plot of the chronicle, such as an unwitting tool of the demon's enemy or someone whose help the demon needs. All of these situations can provide the opportunity for interaction with the potential thrall, and thus afford you the opportunity to make the combination of Faith potential and vulnerability within the character evident.

FORGING THE RELATIONSHIP

Smart players will realize that creating a thrall is a process of turning a potential for belief into a firm conviction in the demon's supernatural nature, as evidenced by the gifts the demon offers. Potential thralls have to be courted and seduced into trusting the fallen enough that they don't just reject any offer of miraculous gifts from the character out of hand. This trust takes time and effort to build, and you're doing the players a disservice if you don't make them put some energy into building this relationship.

The demon is going to have to find a role in her potential thrall's life before she can offer her gifts, be it as a friend, advisor, employer or even mentor. The

demon might forge a closer working relationship with her host's business clients, slowly building a degree of trust and obligation by giving uncannily helpful advice that helps develop the person's business. A demonically possessed parent might become a confidant and advisor of her daughter's boyfriend, who reciprocates to avoid alienating his lover's family. A fallen employer might take an employee under his wing (metaphorically at this stage, at least) and mentor him in the tricks of the trade.

Now, judicious use of the demon's lore can certainly smooth that process, but humans can be stubborn, and no relationship ever runs entirely smoothly. The interaction between the potential thrall and the demon should last through several sessions and go through some significant ups and downs before the mortal character is ripe for accepting a pact.

SEALING THE DEAL

Sealing the Faustian pact is a critical decision that shapes the thrall's life from that point on. If it's the demon's first pact, it's a significant step for her as well, another step toward building a relationship with humanity, for good or ill. More to the point, it's going to be an important moment in your chronicle and one you'll want to explore in detail.

The Faustian pact between demon and mortal operates under very strict conditions. The demon has to make the potential thrall an offer, based on the changes she will make to the thrall's life, and the thrall has to understand that there is a price to be paid for the gifts she will receive. If there is no understanding, there is no deal. For example, a person with severe mental illness might be unable to enter into a pact because he cannot clearly comprehend the conditions. The same can apply to people who are extremely intoxicated or who are under the influence of hallucinogenic drugs.

This is not to say that the demon can't deceive the potential thrall. On the contrary, most do to some extent. As long as the key facts mentioned thus far are understood, the demon can put any gloss on the situation that he wishes.

You should certainly encourage each player to come up with a pitch that gives the potential thrall some idea of where these apparently miraculous gifts are coming from and what the price will be in some way that fits in with the thrall-to-be's character and belief set. A good Christian might be fooled into believing that an angel is bestowing gifts of the spirit upon him, while someone with New Age inclinations might be led to

believe that the demon is doing nothing more than empowering the mortal's own inner talents.

The demon also has to be at least broadly honest about what she's offering. "I will make you a pop star" isn't acceptable, since the demon does not have the power to do that as part of the pact. "I will give you the voice of a pop star" is acceptable, as the demon can do that within the scope of her powers. So too is a pact like "I will give you the talent to become a pop star," which is more persuasive, technically accurate and just ever so slightly misleading. The talent that is necessary to attain that degree of fame does not guarantee it, as thousands of aspiring singers discover every year.

It's probably not wise to set out rigid guidelines for the sort of pacts that a potential thrall will accept, as long as you try to maintain consistent standards. Players are endlessly inventive, and chances are good that they'll come up with angles you'd never even considered. This is another reason that it's worthwhile developing and playing the character for a while before any pact is proposed. It'll give you a clearer idea of how the character will react to what he is being offered. You should let a fallen character grant the gifts to a new thrall only if you are confident that the mortal really would accept the bargain. If not, it's perfectly acceptable to have the potential thrall refuse or ask for more time to consider.

THE MOMENT OF BINDING

The moment of binding, when the pact is sealed and the thrall granted his gifts, is a major moment in a chronicle. It's worth encouraging the players to come up with their own descriptions of how their demon shapes that moment. In Chapter One, you see three different examples of the ways that the fallen can add significance to the sealing of the pact. It's common for demons to put the new thrall through some sort of ritual or initiation to reinforce the nature of the agreement. These often vary by House. Defilers tend to incorporate sex or water into their rituals, whereas Slayers use pain or sacrifice to remind their new thralls of the mortality that defines their lives.

This ritual isn't necessary from a systems standpoint, as reshaping the thrall's soul and body with his own Faith takes only a moment's concentration for the demon. Few demons, however, can resist the temptation to glorify themselves by putting the new thrall through a ritual of sorts. It makes for great roleplaying possibilities, so it's well worth encouraging. It can also be a useful plot hook for you. A misjudged ritual can actually create problems for the

demon. A ritual that is too far outside what the thrall is prepared to believe, smashing his worldview or which ends up terrifying him can cause the thrall to mistrust and fear the demon in the immediate aftermath of the pact. The thrall might end up distrusting both his benefactor and his new abilities and even resist taking advantage of them. A mortal who has been made more beautiful, for example, might find that her beauty now feels like a curse and avoid dressing up or using makeup in order to minimize its benefit. Some will go on to seek a way of breaking the pact and might even become an enemy of the demon. (See p. XX for more on antagonistic thralls.)

THE DEMON—THRALL RELATIONSHIP

Once a pact is sealed, the demon isn't required to maintain further contact with her thrall. She can go on happily harvesting Faith from the thrall each morning, until the thrall dies or is burned out by the demon's need for Faith. One would be ill advised not to take advantage of this newfound relationship, however. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the relationship between thrall and demon is a microcosm of the relationship between the fallen and humanity. If the thrall is neglected, potential consequences arise for the demon who entrails her. By the same token, too much interaction should carry potential risks as well.

CARE AND FEEDING

What should your thrall characters expect of their demonic masters? Well, the thrall has discovered that the fallen is something far more than human, and he will expect her to behave like it. Likewise, he will also expect to be treated better than the hoi polloi. He was chosen to receive divine gifts, so he must be special.

This will also affect the way you present the thrall's responses to the demon's actions. For example, you can play up the potential downside of the demon making the relationship too friendly as the thrall starts pestering the demon for further gifts, which the demon is unable to grant unless the thrall grows in Faith potential. A demon who behaves in a way that you judge to be too remote and powerful should be rewarded with a thrall that spends much of his time prostrate at the demon's feet, begging this mighty being to solve his problems for him. While you

should still portray the thrall as capable of independent thought and actions, there's no doubt that the actions of the demon should have a profound influence on the way he thinks and acts.

It's also worth bearing in mind that a thrall with a close relationship with his infernal master is far more likely to come to the demon with a problem that threatens him. The player will almost certainly want to get his character involved to safeguard her supply of Faith. That's a really handy plot hook that you can use to get the players in your game involved in both supernatural and mundane plots.

GROWING IN FAITH

The major long-term advantage of a close relationship between demon and thrall is that a well-nurtured thrall might actually grow in faith. Over an extended period of time—months certainly, if not years—the thrall's Faith potential might grow by as much as one or two points.

If you want to pursue this angle in your chronicle, you need to ensure that these changes are reflected by a change in attitude and possibly even personality within the thrall. The higher his Faith potential grows, the more zealous or fanatical the thrall becomes. A once useful and independent servant and ally might now become a fawning, subservient sycophant who struggles to think for himself and who no longer functions well in human society. A cunning demon could take advantage of that development. A fanatical thrall with enhanced social abilities makes the perfect leader of a cult, for example. If she doesn't, she might find herself with a problem on her hands as the increasingly fanatical thrall demands more and more of her attention. In either case, you should make sure that that demon's decision has consequences, as her dealings with humanity always do.

EMPLOYMENT

Your troupe may decide, once the players realize that thralls require some degree of personal maintenance, that thralls can be a resource in more ways than just supplying Faith. Thralls are supernaturally enhanced human beings with a more complete understanding of the modern world than their demonic masters. Why not employ them as agents?

Certainly this is appropriate to the themes of **Demon**, as it reflects the demons' history of association with humanity, so it is worth your time to encourage. The character first has to persuade the thrall to work for her, however. You can decide to make this easy or hard, depending on the circumstances, the relationship between the two and the nature of the tasks the demon wishes the thrall to undertake.

NEW PACTS

It's possible, at your discretion, that a thrall might actually grow enough in her faith in the fallen and the supernatural world in general that her Faith potential increases. That's great news for the demon, as she stands to gain more Faith with each sunrise. Some players might choose to keep the thralls closely bound to their characters by using the thralls' increased Faith potential to give the mortals extra gifts. Doing so means renegotiating the pact that binds the two characters. While this shouldn't be as demanding as the initial pact, as the thrall already believes in the demon and power does tend to be addictive, you shouldn't allow it to be a matter of course either. It might be next to impossible if the character has ravaged the thrall of Faith, as the mortal might well be too horrified to allow the demon to gain any more purchase on her soul. Just as with the original pact, the player should have to work at the relationship in order to gain this deeper bond. That means discovering what else the thrall feels is needed in her life after the tremendous changes that the original pact wrought or, if the demon is clever enough, engineering an issue or two to which he can then offer the solution. Especially clever demons wait until they sense that the thrall's faith has grown strong enough that there are two points of Faith to use in a renegotiated pact, one for the thrall and one for the demon. Of course, such a growth in faith takes a long time, but demons are nothing if not patient creatures. After an eternity in the Abyss, what's one more year?

First of all, bear in mind that the pact does not grant the demon absolute control over the thrall. You should emphasize that thralls still have free will. If a demon makes a request of her thrall that you feel would go against the mortal's ethics or beliefs, feel free to have the thrall refuse the request. Alternatively, she could attempt to hide from her master or beg not to be made to do the task, depending on her relationship with the demon. The reasons for refusal could be anything from fear to disgust at what she's being asked to do, right through to existing family or personal commitments that prevent her from being at the demon's beck and call. That being said, a demonic master is operating from a position of power over her mortal thrall. The mortal now has a clue of the abilities and nature of the demon and he might well be somewhat awed by or terrified of the character. This conflict between the thrall's conscience and her fear of her demonic master can create a powerful

degree of tension into the relationship. The demon can't abuse her influence over her thralls, lest she provoke a refusal or rebellion just when she needs them the most.

Also bear in mind the degree to which the character has made an effort to win over or mollify the thralls. Depending on the thrall's personality and interests, he should be more willing to serve a demon actively if he's been sold a story of a struggle the demon is fighting for the good of the world, humanity, Creation or even just the demon and her chosen followers. As ever, it is up to you whether the thrall falls for this, based on how well the player articulates the idea and the thrall's own receptiveness to the idea. Certainly the thrall will be more open to concepts like this than he was prior to accepting the Faustian bargain. Now, incidentally, is one of the times when a really good ritual used at the time of forming the pact can pay off. It makes the thrall feel like he's part of something more supernatural than he probably suspected existed. While the limits of what the thrall will believe have been stretched, however, they're not limitless. If the demon overplays her hand, she might find the thrall less willing to serve her rather than more so. ("Why didn't you tell me you were caught up in all this before the deal? You tricked me!")

A thrall who is persuaded by the demon's argument, however, can be a loyal and committed servant for the demon. If he truly believes in the cause, he'll commit what time and resources he has to aiding the demon. The higher the thrall's Faith potential is, the more fanatical he might be about the relationship with his infernal master and the more likely he is to act for her without question.

Still, most thralls have other responsibilities, too — such as a family, friends and a job — and you shouldn't ignore that fact. This is another advantage to developing a full picture of the thrall's life prior to introducing him in the game. You have a ready arsenal of relatives to fall ill, bosses to make unreasonable demands on the thrall's time and lovers who will make their own demands on the thrall's limited time.

A few thralls, if they are managed well by their demons, might start to let go of these parts of their old lives. Like a new member of a cult or somebody who's been sucked into the social life around a new job, they start to neglect their existing relationships. If the people in their "old lives" start complaining and making more demands of them, they might even find it easier to cut all ties to them. You shouldn't make this easy for the fallen, though, and if they choose this route, make them really

work at persuading the thrall that this is the right path, with demonstrable benefits.

SURVIVAL INSTINCTS

Although the notion often escapes the fallen, thralls are still human, and they are almost certainly not going to throw themselves willingly into harm's way for a being considerably more powerful and capable than them without a really good reason. For instance, a demon who is actively working to build a religion that the thrall fervently believes in is more likely to get a positive response. You should remember that the higher the thrall's Faith potential is, the more likely he is to throw himself into the demon's cause. That same potential also makes the thralls that much more valuable to the demon, however. The final call on what a thrall will or won't do for a demon is yours of course. Just bear in mind that the more a demon takes a thrall's service for granted, the more likely the thrall is to refuse her or simply disappear just when she needs him the most.

Even if the demon can persuade the thrall to risk his life in her service, it might not be in the demon's best interest to do so. If the thrall dies, the demon loses her regular supply of Faith. The loss could ruin her relationship with her other thralls as well, if they are aware of the mortal's death. There is also the problem of Torment. How long can the character callously use her thralls as cannon fodder before she's squandered what little humanity she has?

ABANDONMENT

While it is certainly the easiest course of action a demon can take — allowing her to take full advantage of the thrall's Faith while getting on with her plans — abandoning a thrall is not without its consequences. After all, this is a human being who has just been handed a life-changing power. Does he have the responsibility to use it wisely? Probably not. Power is addictive, and once the thrall starts experimenting with his profoundly altered abilities, he's going to be sorely tempted to abuse them. Very soon he might find himself famous, king of the local social scene or scaling the heights of the corporate ladder. The newspapers are full of stories of the successful and the famous who burn themselves out with drugs, drink, high-living and promiscuous sex, and these are people who have actually worked for their fame, rather than having it granted by a supernatural entity. A thrall who dies of a drug overdose or kills himself in a head-on crash in his new Ferrari is not going to be much use to his master.

Of course, arbitrarily killing off a character's thralls can be seen as capricious and unfair,

particularly amid tense situations where the demon needs all the Faith she can get. Chances are, however, that a thrall without some amount of supervision is going to screw up eventually, and you'd be quite within your rights as a Storyteller to incorporate that as part of the chronicle's plot. Enhanced abilities or demonic power do not make a mortal immune to instances of bad judgment. When this happens, the first person the thrall turns to will likely be the demon who granted him the power in the first place. Sure, the character can choose to send the thrall away with a curt dismissal or a veiled threat, but then she risks making an enemy of the thrall or seeing him despair, fail and possibly die. It's perfectly within your rights to kill off a thrall that the character has neglected, once more emphasizing for the players the consequences of the relations between demons and humanity.

You can exploit a fallen character's negligence of her thralls in other ways. One obvious possibility is the character's demonic enemies. Finding a demon's abandoned thrall might well give another demon, or even one of the Earthbound, a useful lead on the character, as well as the chance to suddenly deprive her of a significant part of her power. The neglected and bitter thrall might also be a very useful source of information for a demon-hunter.

In short, an abandoned thrall is a ready set of plot hooks just waiting to be exploited should your players hand you the opportunity. If they do, go to it.

COMPLICATIONS

All relationships have the potential to go wrong. The relationship between a thrall and a demon is always under threat, given the latter's likelihood of descending into periods when her Torment rules her. When that point comes, you should make sure that the demon finds herself faced with the choice between mending the relationship or losing the offered Faith. If she's really unlucky, she might find the thrall making the choice for her. How do you go about portraying the times when the relationship between the two goes bad? Here are a few concepts for you to consider.

INCREASING TORMENT

It's surprisingly easy for the fallen to find their Torment increasing without really noticing it. That's largely because Torment tends to grow when the characters are busy dealing with threats and their own agendas, often leaving little time for reflection on their psychological state. You should prompt players to reflect the increasing Torment with changes in



their character's behavior. Where once the character might have been caring and open, she will grow more distant and secretive. A relationship with a thrall that was once almost like friendship or a mentor-student bond will become more and more controlling. In any case, you should make sure that the growing intolerance and contempt for thralls and humanity in general makes itself manifest quickly, unless the player gives you a damn good reason why it shouldn't. Even if the players neglect to make changes to the way they roleplay their characters, you can bring the issue of increasing Torment into the chronicle through the relationship to their thralls.

In particular, the characters' use of lore and the apocalyptic form has a profoundly disturbing effect on most thralls as the characters grow more tormented. Those thralls who have been sold the idea of a relationship with a supernatural creature on its basically benign nature will be shocked and probably scared by their master's new demonic appearance. Serving a noble, heavenly being with eagle wings is one thing, serving a creature with scales and claws is quite another. The visual differences between angels and demons are deeply ingrained in most people and the whole of western culture, and seeing those differences manifest can severely shake the thrall's belief in his demon. It's easy to portray that distress by making the thrall act in a terrified manner when he first sees the high-T torment effects and thereafter increasingly nervous in the demon's company. As the Torment grows, the thrall might become reluctant to even meet with the demon. Even if he's not shaken by the sight of a true demon, the considerable chance of being caught by the high-T torment effects of an evocation is likely to make a thrall start to seriously reconsider both his commitment to the demon and the nature of her own gifts.

Unless a demon has been completely honest about his basic nature and time in Hell and you have created thralls who are unusually strong-willed, the periods when Torment is high are likely to be the most trying on the demon-thrall relationship. Those thralls who have had a basically amicable relationship with their demons are likely to find themselves questioning the pact for the first time, and those who had a difficult relationship to start with are likely to start seeking a way out or hating themselves. Even those who know of the demon's true nature are going to be sorely tested by being tied to a being who is full of hate, anger and contempt, unless they can absent themselves from the demon's presence until his Torment subsides.

SELF-DOUBTS

One of the first indicators you can give a player that the relationship between demon and thrall is suffering is a doubt in the thrall's own Faith-born abilities. While he likes and trusts the demon, the powers seem a good thing, a boon in his life and a sign of how special he is. As the thrall comes to recognize and fear the darker side of the demon's nature, he gains some clue as to the true origin of his gifts. You can start showing his disgust and horror at the thought that such a creature transformed him.

Initially, you could have the thrall decide to stop using the abilities, as well as suffering guilt when he slips up and uses the ability, as he is bound to do. This becomes acute with pact gifts that create actual changes in the thrall, such as increased Attributes or Abilities. A thrall who has come to doubt his gifts becomes prone to self-hatred and might start trying to avoid situations where his gifts come into play. A socially enhanced thrall could become a loner, for example, while one who is now an excellent sportsman might shy away from competition.

You could have the thrall react in the opposite way if his personality makes him prone to hedonism, criminal behavior or any other activities that are perceived as negative by society. The thrall might accept that he is damned and throw himself into the role with gusto. He has sold his soul to a demonic creature. What point is there in living by any kind of moral code? You could even have the thrall indulge himself in all the things that society teaches us are bad, not just the ones he was prone to before. Activities such as violence, crime, selfishness, extreme greed, debauchery, sexual deviance and promiscuity have a buzz all their own, trapping the thrall in an addictive downward spiral.

In extreme cases, this revulsion and self-doubt might manifest as a desire for self-harm to try to "purify" the thralls' tainted flesh, much like the mortification rituals that some religious orders mandated in the Middle Ages. The site of a once-loyal thrall carving herself up to try to cleanse herself of her taint might be enough to shock a high-T torment character into reconsidering the way she is behaving.

BURNOUT

While periods when the demon is suffering from high levels of Torment can strain and abuse the relationship between demon and thrall, the moment when the demon chooses to ravage Faith from the thrall wrecks it completely. The cozy illusion that the demon-thrall relationship is one of mutual benefit is

torn asunder as the thrall's very soul is violated. The first time a demon takes too much from a thrall is as significant a moment in their relationship as the moment that the pact was sealed, so it is worthy of your particular attention.

The curious thing about this crucial action is that the demon will likely be nowhere near the thrall when the ravaging occurs. As the Storyteller, all you have to do is give the player some sense of the pain and anguish that flashes through the link between the demon and thrall as the thrall is violated, then award the extra dice and carry on with the story. If the thrall happens to be with the demon at the time, your options are much greater. You have the opportunity to describe how the thrall suffers from the demon's brutal treatment. She might collapse in a heap, claw at her face, shriek in terror, suffer a fit of hysteria or lapse into a catatonic state.

Depending on her personality, the thrall might be angry or scared. Something horrible has happened to her, something she can't explain or ignore, but something that is inextricably linked in her mind with her relationship to the demon. Just as the demon sensed the thrall's pain through the link between the two, the thrall senses that the demon was responsible for her agony. She might be full of questions, demanding that the demon explain what happened. She might be angry, that the demon has betrayed the pact and done her harm. She might even be worried, concerned that something has happened to the demon, too.

You might want to consider some other changes in the way you play the scene. The thrall has lost at least a single point of Willpower and will be less sure of herself. She'll be desperately seeking some sort of explanation for what happened to her and might even accept a half-baked explanation if it gives her some assurance that she won't go through that horrible experience again. At this stage, your main objective is to show the players that there is a consequence for their actions and that they can't abuse their thralls in this way with impunity. You might even choose to have the thrall disappear or pretend nothing is wrong while she secretly plans some form of revenge.

The second time the demon violates the thrall, she's probably destroyed any trust between them. While the thrall might still serve the demon, he does so purely out of fear now, rather than through any awe or affection. A thrall who lost all her Willpower through the demon's violation of the pact is a pitiable sight indeed. Beset by madness, utterly terrified by the sight of the demon and probably hallucinating wildly,

she is almost certainly incapable of looking after herself. She might even be institutionalized if friends or any member of the emergency services finds her.

You need to make these scenes powerful for two reasons. First of all, the player should become aware that she has seriously damaged one of her character's precious few sources of spiritual power, possibly in a manner that can never be fixed. Second, it resonates with the terrible consequences for mankind of the demons' decision to rebel against Heaven. It is, in microcosm, the tragedy of the rebellion replayed between a single demon and a single human.

OPTIONAL RULE: DESTROYED FAITH

Demon: The Fallen avoids giving any hard-and-fast rules for decreasing a thrall's Faith potential after a pact is violated, leaving it to your judgment and the needs of the story. If you'd like a rule of thumb, we suggest that a thrall loses a point of Faith potential for every two points of Willpower that the demon consumes. As Faith points are lost, the thrall loses her infernal gifts first, then once all of these are gone, the Faith points set aside for the demon are affected.

REBELLION

Once a thrall starts to realize that she is bound to a creature that might be a literal *demon*, she might start to contemplate rebelling against her infernal master. The major problem she faces is that she knows nothing of the way that the pact actually operates, unless the demon has been careless indeed (and you should bear that in mind as you bring a rebellion plot into the game). For example, it would be reasonable for the thrall to assume that the further she ran from the demon, the less influence he would have over her. Indeed, she might assume that if she hid from the demon's influence for long enough, she might eventually free herself from the bond. Both of these assumptions are wrong, but the thrall has no way of knowing this, so both are reasonable courses for the character to take.

You might have the thrall choose to attack the demon in the hope of freeing herself from the pact. This can actually succeed. If a demon is sucked back into Hell, the bond between the two is severed and the thrall loses any enhancements she gained from the pact. Even if the demon returns from Hell and finds the thrall once more, he will be forced to renegotiate the pact to re-establish it.

Another route that you might chose for the thrall is to have her try to seek sanctuary with a religious person or at a religious site. This might also work if the person has genuine faith or the site is truly holy ground (see p. 254 of the **Demon** core

rules for more details). While the thrall is on holy ground, demons cannot receive offered Faith from the thrall each day, nor can they ravage the mortal for additional points of Faith.

The only sure-fire way to break the pact is for the demon to transfer her faith potential to a religious belief system. This process is slow, however. While most religions have their tales of miraculous religious conversions, most thralls have fallen too far to be allowed such an easy escape. For each month of genuine commitment to the creeds, strictures and beliefs of the religion, roll a number of dice equal to the thrall's Faith potential. The difficulty of the roll is 7; if the roll succeeds, a single point of the thrall's Faith potential transfers to his new faith. The thrall also loses one of the gifts he was given as part of the pact. The demon who holds the pact stops receiving Faith from the thrall only once the points devoted to the gifts have already been transferred. If any of these rolls results in a botch, the thrall loses all belief in his newfound religion and succumbs to despair, causing the original pact to return at full strength. If the thrall succeeds in transferring all his Faith to the religion, he is free of the pact and now truly committed to his new beliefs. You could even have former thralls go on to become exorcists and demon-hunters, turning their liberated Faith against their former tormentors.

OTHER Variations

So far, this chapter has assumed that the players are portraying demon characters, while you take on the role of the various thralls. You could, however, choose to create a chronicle or tell a single story where one or more thralls are major characters. This sort of game gives you the opportunity to bring the relationship between the fallen and humanity to the absolute forefront of the game, and it can be an extremely rewarding way of playing **Demon: The Fallen** that is at once more low key and more intense than a conventional **Demon** chronicle. Adopting this approach obviously changes the themes of the chronicle somewhat and requires some different planning.

THRALLS AS MAJOR CHARACTERS

Integrating thrall characters into a mixed demon and thrall chronicle presents the following two major problems for you: the imbalance of power levels between the two types of character and the fact that at least one character has significant power over another.

The first point is perhaps the easier for you to address. As long as the players in the chronicle are mature enough to realize that pure supernatural muscle is not the be all and end all of a character, it's a relatively simple matter to construct stories that play to both groups' strengths and weaknesses. The key thing to remember is that while thralls lack the greater powers of the demons, they also lack the weaknesses — the dangers of growing Torment, the ready detection by other demons, the constant danger from demon-hunters and the occasional lack of comprehension of the modern world.

You should be fine as long as you present the characters with a range of challenges that suits their differing power levels and skills. The demons need to face off against particularly powerful mortals and demon-hunters as well as supernatural forces, while the mortal characters are better suited to dealing with other mortals, be they businessmen, government officials, criminals or cops. Of course, you need to be flexible with this variety. A group of thralls might well be able to take on a single demon if the characters are careful and they use their wits.

Also, bear in mind that newly created demons with relatively little faith are quite limited in the amount of major supernatural feats they can achieve, and they will often have to fall back on the particular mundane specialties of their thralls. Even in moments of combat, a gun can sometimes be surprisingly effective against one of the fallen, housed as they are in mortal shells.

The Earthbound and their servants make surprisingly good antagonists for this sort of game. The mortal cultists and servants of the Earthbound (as well as those more directly possessed by those ancient and mysterious demons) offer a good range of power levels for you to use both to reflect and to challenge the different players' characters.

Another thing to bear in mind is that the players are likely to end up paired off in two different ways. The demons and their own thralls are going to make up one group, while the other thralls and the rest of the demons are likely to form two discrete groups. While this is no bad thing — as it creates social dynamics that are great fun to play out — keep an eye on it. It has the potential to create divisions out of character, which can ruin everyone's fun.

The bigger problem you face with this sort of chronicle is the fact that some of the players' characters hold the power or life or death over other players' characters. It takes only a moment's thought from a demon character to reduce a thrall character to a gibbering wreck of a man, incapable of functioning as

a character any longer. While some groups have the maturity to handle this sort of situation, others don't. Before entering this sort of chronicle, discuss this consequence with all the players involved, and continue with it only when you're satisfied that they can all handle it.

Despite these challenges, this style of game is well worth pursuing if the relationship between demons and humanity is a major interest of the troupe.

THE ALL-THRALL CHRONICLE

If the problems of a mixed chronicle put you and your players off, an all-thrall game is worth considering. By its very nature, this will be a lower-powered and grittier version of a conventional **Demon** chronicle, focusing as much on what the thralls do with their gifts in their own lives as the demands of their demonic masters. Such a chronicle could be structured in several different ways. The following are just a few examples:

MENCHMEN

The characters are the thralls of two or more demons, and they are desperately trying to balance their own lives against the demands of their masters. Is any pact worth facing off against other demons and their servants? How easy is it to educate their masters about modern humanity? How do they cope as the demons' Torment grows and their demands on the characters become increasingly hard to bear?

REBELS

Enough is enough. However wonderful the Faustian pact seemed when the characters agreed to it, the horror of serving demons has grown too much for the characters to endure. They band together with one purpose in mind: to escape the power of their terrible masters. Through sharing information and working together, can the characters figure out the demons' weaknesses or find a way to free themselves from their spiritual bonds?

CULTISTS

The characters all serve the same demon. She has charged them with building a cult that serves and worships her, all the better to provide her with

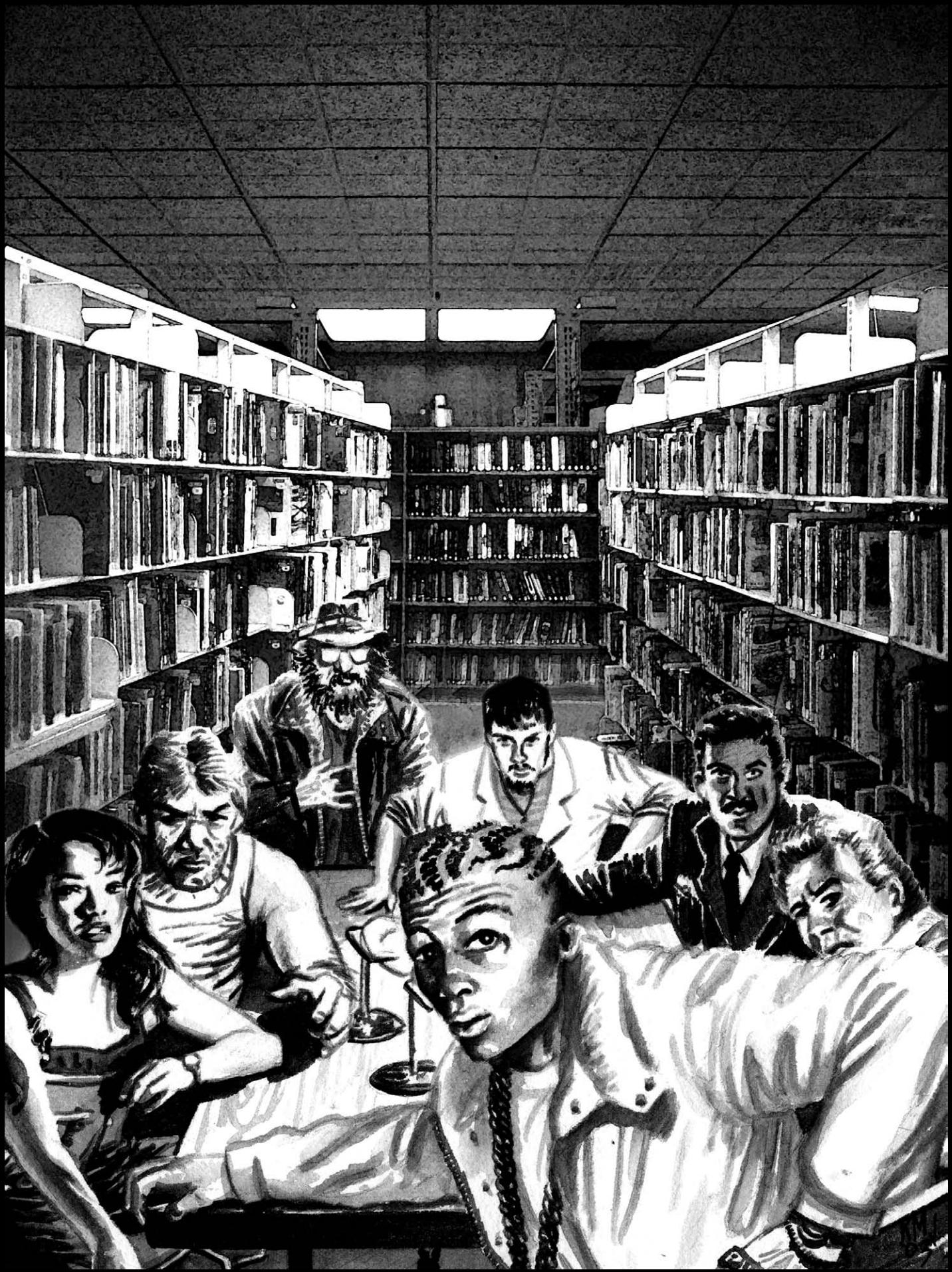
the Faith that she needs to fight her enemies. The characters start off fully committed to their mistress, but they soon face uncomfortable questions. Who is she fighting, and is she really working for the good of all or just herself?

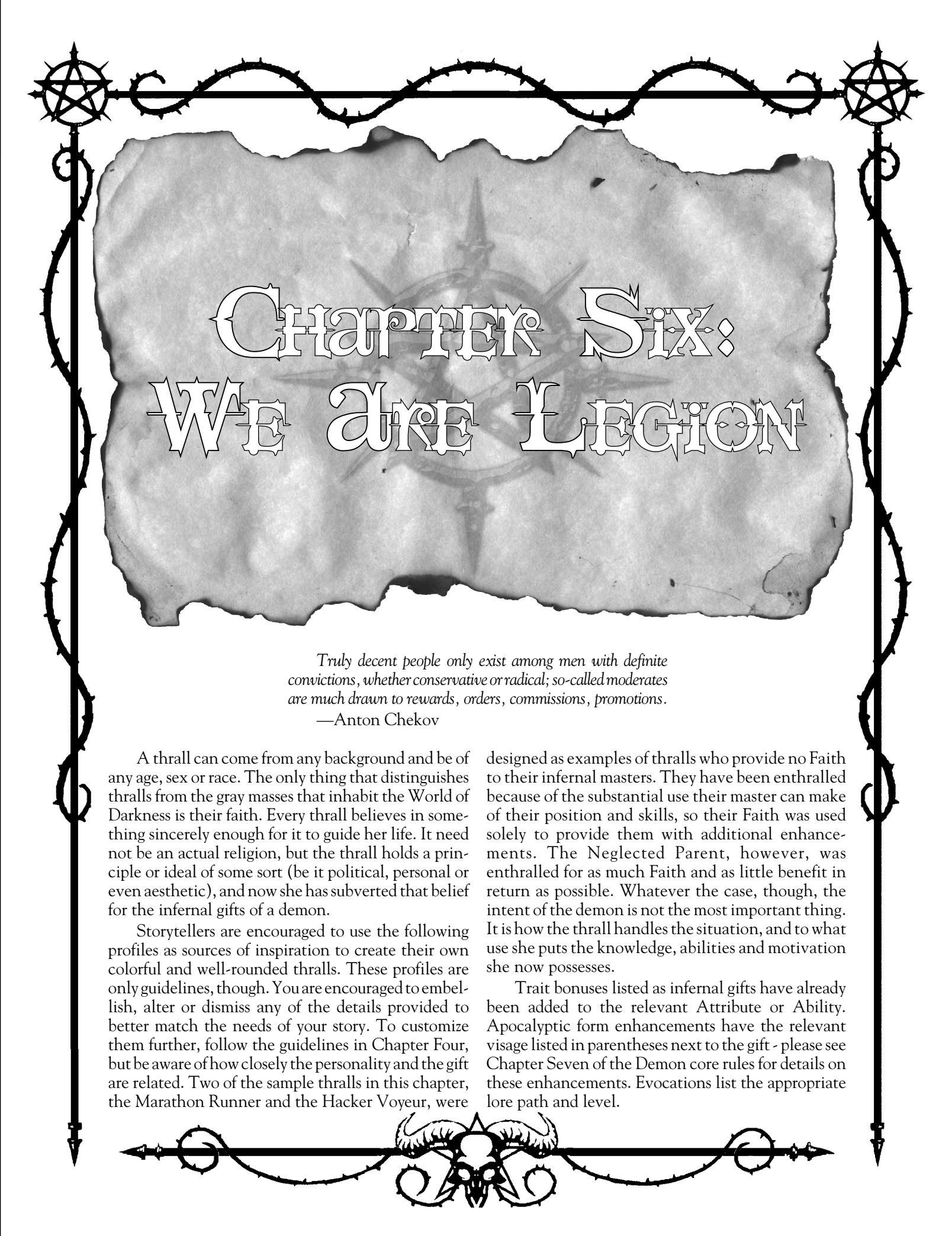
TROUPE-STYLE PLAY

The last option is to combine the traditional **Demon: The Fallen** chronicle with the all-thrall chronicle, with your players taking on the roles of demon *and* thrall. Each member of the troupe creates a fallen character, then as each demon gains a thrall, the role of the mortal is played by a different member of the troupe. This setup gives the players the opportunity to experience both sides of the equation and really explore the range of humanity's interaction with demons, at the price of an increased workload for you. As the friction between demon and thrall is a significant part of the game, splitting up the demon and her thralls between players allows that friction to come to the fore.

The challenge for you is to come up with a chronicle that operates at two levels, with challenges appropriate for all-thrall groups, all-demon groups and mixed groups. The guidelines given for a mixed-group game make a good starting point, but you really have to take the time to understand the strengths and weakness of the whole range of potential antagonists in the game. You're plotting for double the number of characters now. The range of antagonists will probably need to be expanded to match as well. You'll have to put more focus on human opponents such as cultists, demon hunters, cops and existing mortal enemies (and friends). They are now key people for the thrall characters to interact with, and they deserve the same level of development you'd give any Storyteller character.

The other major advantage of this style of game is that it overcomes some of the traditional problems of storytelling games. If a player can't make a session and his character is crucial to the action in some way, he can give his thrall, played by another of the players, instructions and thus participate by proxy. The thrall can then report back at the beginning of the next session.





CHAPTER SIX: WE ARE LEGION

Truly decent people only exist among men with definite convictions, whether conservative or radical; so-called moderates are much drawn to rewards, orders, commissions, promotions.

—Anton Chekov

A thrall can come from any background and be of any age, sex or race. The only thing that distinguishes thralls from the gray masses that inhabit the World of Darkness is their faith. Every thrall believes in something sincerely enough for it to guide her life. It need not be an actual religion, but the thrall holds a principle or ideal of some sort (be it political, personal or even aesthetic), and now she has subverted that belief for the infernal gifts of a demon.

Storytellers are encouraged to use the following profiles as sources of inspiration to create their own colorful and well-rounded thralls. These profiles are only guidelines, though. You are encouraged to embellish, alter or dismiss any of the details provided to better match the needs of your story. To customize them further, follow the guidelines in Chapter Four, but be aware of how closely the personality and the gift are related. Two of the sample thralls in this chapter, the Marathon Runner and the Hacker Veyeur, were

designed as examples of thralls who provide no Faith to their infernal masters. They have been enthralled because of the substantial use their master can make of their position and skills, so their Faith was used solely to provide them with additional enhancements. The Neglected Parent, however, was enthralled for as much Faith and as little benefit in return as possible. Whatever the case, though, the intent of the demon is not the most important thing. It is how the thrall handles the situation, and to what use she puts the knowledge, abilities and motivation she now possesses.

Trait bonuses listed as infernal gifts have already been added to the relevant Attribute or Ability. Apocalyptic form enhancements have the relevant visage listed in parentheses next to the gift - please see Chapter Seven of the Demon core rules for details on these enhancements. Evocations list the appropriate lore path and level.

POLITICAL HACK

*There are leaders and there are followers.
Take care you're following the right one.*

Prelude: Some people are put on this earth to do things, and you were always sure you were one of them. School council, debating team, fund-raisers; you were there taking on whatever responsibility you could, gaining the momentum to propel you straight into the best college and the best law firm, then right into the political arena.

What you have learned is that people are always happy to let someone else do the work, but a charming smile and the ability to hold an audience gets the rewards. Well of course you knew that. What took you 30-something years to realize is that you didn't have it. No matter how carefully you researched, how logically you argued, no matter whether you listened to your image consultant or had your teeth straightened, you just didn't have it. You were regarded as a bit player, a useful adjunct to the movers and shakers, those who were allowed to represent the party in the public eye.

Well, that just wasn't good enough! The work you'd put in hadn't left you with much outside your career. Not even your family had ever really appreciated your ambition. You had to succeed! You cast about for options and decided to take up with an affiliation of environmentally friendly companies called the Eden Group and bring their cause to the party's attention.

The group's chairman seemed to have the golden touch. You found yourself swept away by his sheer charisma. You started seeking excuses to be around him, doing more work than had you ever intended. You just wanted to watch him and try to learn what he did. You became more and more convinced that he was somehow inhuman, a cut above all lesser mortals, including yourself. That was when he asked what you would do if you won a seat at the next state election.

Well, you did it. Once you won your party's nomination, the rest seemed easy — you'd always known you could do it. Of course, you have your deal with

the Eden Group, but environmental policy is still fashionable, and it's not as though every single other member doesn't owe favors to... something.

Concept: You believe in the institutions of this country and the power of one person to achieve something worthwhile. Or you did. Somehow, that seems to have gotten lost along the way. It seems that the chairman, and others like him, are really controlling the whole deal, and you are now part of the betrayal of the institutions in which you trusted and invested so much. But what can you do?

Roleplaying Hints: You are a firm, intelligent woman with a magic voice and an enchanting glance.

You are always aware of who is watching and how you look, adjusting your behavior to the best advantage, even when more important things are at stake. Lead your companions in every situation. You might actually know best, but dealing with the chairman is where your confidence and certainty fails.

Equipment: expensive wardrobe, cell phone, PDA

Nature: Director

Demeanor: Director

Concept: Political Hack

Attributes: Strength 2, Dexterity 2, Stamina 2, Charisma 2, Manipulation 3, Appearance 2, Perception 3, Intelligence 3, Wits 3

Abilities: Alertness 1, Computer 1, Dodge 1, Drive 1, Etiquette 3, Intuition 1, Law 3, Leadership 2, Linguistics 1, Politics 4 (Campaigning), Research 3, Subterfuge 2

Backgrounds: Allies 1, Attentive Master 2, Contacts 1, Fame 2, Followers 1, Influence 2, Resources 2

Virtues: Conscience 1, Conviction 3, Courage 2

Willpower: 5

Faith Potential: 2

Infernal Gifts: Inhuman Allure (Visage of Radiance)



Marathon Runner

How fast can you run with a devil on your back?

Prelude: You are a household name, or you were after the last Olympics. People recognized you in the street, and you did promotions for running shoes and the benefits of not taking drugs. It was the culmination of a career commenced in junior high; a talent nurtured with the best coaching the system could offer. Colleges courted you. You reaped all the rewards of popularity and respect, and you provided victory in return. Don't let anyone misunderstand, you worked hard. Your self-discipline was legendary. Day after day, night after night, it was you there with the track before you and the mantra running through your mind: *I can do it! I can be the best!*

Injury was always a problem; the marathon leaves no room for weakness. You were so careful! In the end, though, it wasn't your tendons or arches or any specific part that surgery and therapy might have fixed. Every joint in your legs suffered abrasion as the cartilage just wore away over the years. You'd had a good career, the doctors said, but your body couldn't continue. So there you were, faced for the first time with life beyond the marathon.

Your publicist announced "an indefinite break," and you went into a tailspin. If you'd been paying attention, you might have realized you had friends that cared about you — not your track record — but you shut them out and went looking for miracle cures. From magnetism to enriched water, you would try anything. Eventually you fell into the hands of a faith healer. He demanded a strict preparatory regime from his clients, with meditation and fasting and a series of revelations, the final of which was the healer's true nature as a transcendent being. It all seemed like a dream when you were back home, but you had the physique of an 18-year-old kid.

Your comeback was a triumph. Then instructions began to arrive, telling you what to say when the media asked how you proved the doctors wrong.

After a long, hard think, you obeyed. Now you are told who to speak to and where to appear, and you are starting to realize that there is more to this time than you bargained for. You are frightened, but what do people do when they're frightened?

Run.

Concept: The perfect athlete has always been your self-image and ideal, of the body acting in total harmony with the will. You believed in that, but now, your will has nothing to with it. Everything is dependent on the entity you saw. Like a figure on a trophy, you're hollow inside.

Roleplaying Hints: Come on with a smile, a hearty hello and a friendly handshake — every new acquaintance is a potential fan. Treat every situation as a race with a goal at the end of a clear path, and scoff at people who want to complicate things. Handle everything physically, until you are forced to acknowledge the fact that the physical world is no longer the issue.

Equipment: expensive running shoes, cell phone

Nature: Competitor

Demeanor: Gallant

Concept: Marathon Runner

Attributes: Strength 5 (Weightlifter), Dexterity 5 (Marathon Runner), Stamina 4 (Tireless), Charisma 3, Manipulation 2, Appearance 2, Perception 2, Intelligence 2, Wits 2

Abilities: Academics 1, Alertness 2, Athletics 4 (Running), Brawl 2, Dodge 3, Drive 1, Finance 1, Leadership 1, Medicine 2, Melee 1, Performance 2, Stealth 2, Survival 2

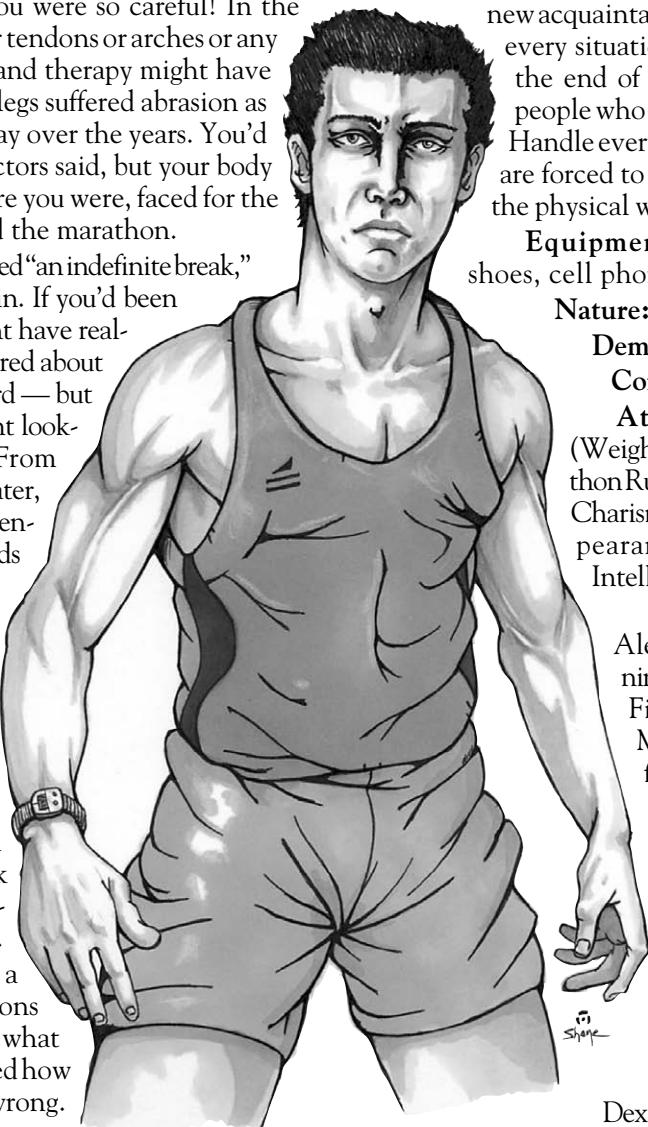
Backgrounds: Attentive Master 2, Fame 3, Resources 2

Virtues: Conscience 2, Conviction 2, Courage 4

Willpower: 6

Faith Potential: 1

Infernal Gifts: Strength +1, Dexterity +1, Stamina +2



HACKER VOYEUR

*Nah, not tonight guys.
There's something special on TV.*

Prelude: One of your earliest memories is of being in church. The priest looked down from the pulpit, directly at you, and boomed, "God is watching!" For most of your childhood, you believed that wherever you were, whatever you were doing, God could see you. Well into your adolescence there were nights when you couldn't sleep because of the gnawing anxiety. That was when you first began to watch other people, to collect information with your computer. It gave you a feeling of control.

You used to hack into school records and sometimes the PCs of those who caught your attention. You were good enough to get away with it — good enough to land your current job juggling numbers on a computer screen that can make and break fortunes. You had given up your old, illegal habits long before, of course. You had made friends and had a real life.

Only you couldn't be sure about the girls in the office. Elaine came home with you once after Friday drinks. You don't remember much of it, but she declined a second date — which is why you absolutely had to know what she said to the others. After you broke into her email, you had to keep watching. Then you started watching the others, even your friends, just to make sure they weren't suspicious. Pretty soon you weren't sleeping again. One night it got so bad that you ran into the darkness to find the nearest church and stand outside screaming at God to fuck off!

That was when you met Father Ancible. He had been out walking, he said, and he suggested that you and he take another turn of the block. It was such a relief to talk about your fears, your doubts, how you could never trust anyone. Somehow you felt you could trust him. He showed you things that made you feel better. A week later, he asked you what you wanted most in the world, then he smiled and gave it to you, because he already knew.

He wants you to do stuff for him now, but fair's fair. Really,

they're only numbers on a screen. For the work you do, you get a videotape that shows you things — Dorothy in the shower, Peter in a brothel, everything you could possibly need to know. You've even recorded Elaine crouching over a computer screen after hours, fiddling some numbers of her own. So if you ask *really nicely*, maybe she'll come home with you again.

Concept: Your conviction that you are small and alone in a vast, harsh universe terrifies you, but as hard as you try, you can't shake it. You try to believe your new toy puts you back in control, but didn't it come from something vaster, stranger and more powerful than you could possibly comprehend?

Roleplaying Hints: You've got your professional façade all shined up. When events take an unexpected turn, you take things in your stride, baffling 'em with bullshit until you come up with the right answer, or someone else does, or you can just slip outside...

Equipment: laptop computer, cell phone, enchanted videotape

Nature: Narcissist

Demeanor: Conformist

Concept: Hacker Voyeur

Attributes: Strength 2, Dexterity 3, Stamina 2, Charisma 2, Manipulation 1, Appearance 3, Perception 3, Intelligence 4 (Analytical), Wits 3

Abilities: Academics 1, Alertness 2, Computer 4 (Hacking), Drive 1, Etiquette 1, Finance 3, Intuition 2, Law 2, Religion 1, Science 1, Subterfuge 3, Technology 2

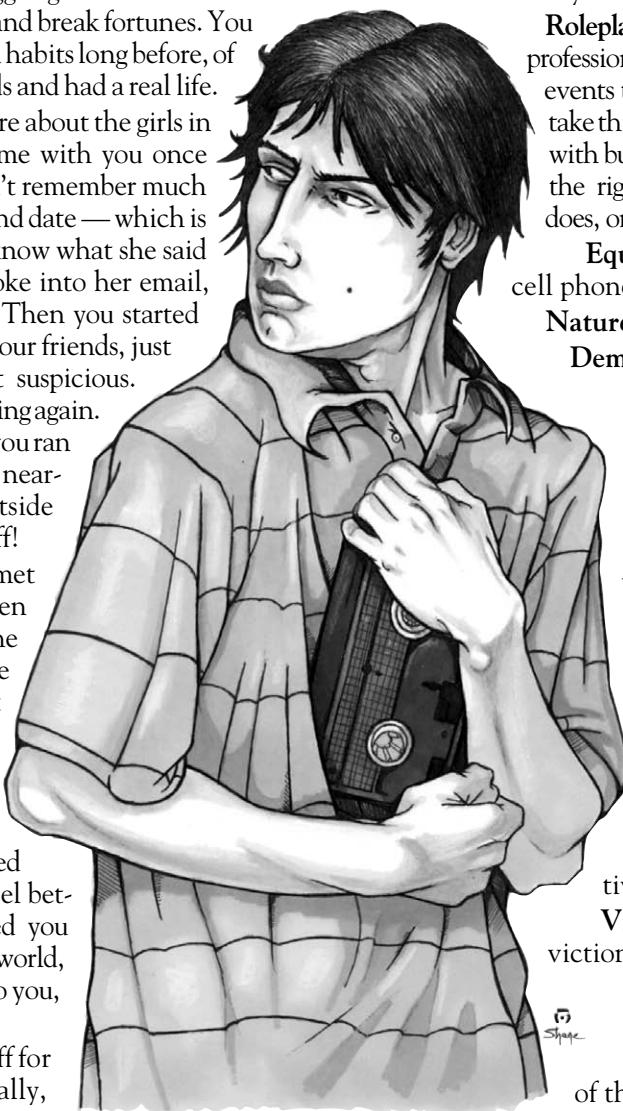
Backgrounds: Attentive Master 2, Resources 4

Virtues: Conscience 2, Conviction 3, Courage 1

Willpower: 5

Faith Potential: 2

Infernal Gifts: Scry (Lore of the Firmament ••)



Frustrated Genius

Quiet. I'm thinking.

Prelude: You were a prodigy, it was widely reported — from primary school into university (where you were years younger than your classmates). You took all the theory of modern mathematics and assimilated it. You understood the connections between things. You were, everyone agreed, destined for great things.

Great things, however, slid away from you every time you got close. It's more desperate than it seems — no mathematician ever made a significant discovery past age 30. Crazy but true. Your 30th year approached, and you had achieved nothing. A few papers here and there, letters in appropriate journals, nothing. You've blamed all sorts of people in the last couple of years. Your old teachers for not being able to keep up. Your parents for not pushing the system hard enough. Your various girlfriends — giggling airheads the lot of them. The university and your fellow tutors, for wasting your time. Especially that idiot ex-hippie, Matt, with all his ideas about subrings that he'd come up with while on weed. That man was a disgrace to the faculty.

One night Matt came up to you and said he was a demon. He then demanded that you prove him wrong. It was more ridiculous than his lateral thinking exercises usually were, but just as annoying, and you told him to shove it.

That was three months ago, and by now you have admitted defeat. There is power in him. Power over people and a power to expand your own perceptions. You could dive into non-linear polynomial spaces, and he'd be there, showing you around like a native. You asked him if he could write a proof for Fermat's last theorem, and he laughed and said that maybe you could find one yourself.

You know you have to be careful about this. Several short stories are based on mathematicians and the devil — you've got that "I of Newton" episode of the *Twilight Zone* on tape somewhere. Only this isn't some pat story where you can trap Satan with geometry, this is dangerous and

real. But if Matt's really a demon, he has been beaten before and he can be beaten again. If anyone can beat him, it's you. So yes, you accepted his offer, half in rage, half in giddy excitement. Now you can feel your mental vision becoming clearer. You can also feel his hooks in you, and you suddenly wonder if you and he are even playing the same game.

Concept: You believe in the eternal verities of mathematics. To comprehend these things is to experience the core reality of the universe, what some people might call God. So what does it mean now that you have found the devil in the numbers?

Roleplaying Hints: You are used to communicating with other people by lecturing and then answering questions. Within your areas of expertise you are always right, and not even a demon can gainsay you. Your reasoning skills are first class, so when the action becomes physical, try to turn it into a logic problem — or call a taxi.

Equipment: scientific calculator, laptop, books on advanced mathematical theory

Nature: Perfectionist

Demeanor: Pedagogue

Concept: Frustrated Genius

Attributes: Strength 2, Dexterity 3, Stamina 2, Charisma 2, Manipulation 2, Appearance 2, Perception 2, Intelligence 4 (Methodical thinker), Wits 3

Abilities: Academics 3, Alertness 2, Computer 2, Crafts 1, Drive 1, Etiquette 1, Expression 2, Intimidation 2, Religion 1, Research 3, Science 5 (Mathematics), Stealth 1, Subterfuge 1

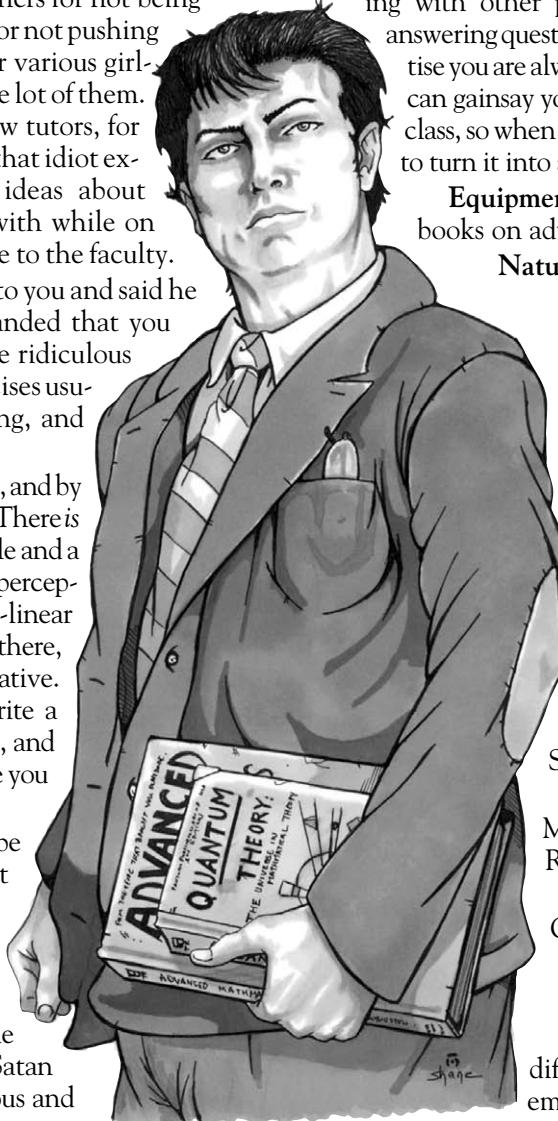
Backgrounds: Attentive Master 1, Fame 1, Mentor 1, Resources 2

Virtues: Conscience 2, Conviction 3, Courage 1

Willpower: 7

Faith Potential: 2

Infernal Gifts: Reduced the difficulty of any Science (Mathematics) rolls by two.



EMBITTERED ACTIVIST

This world could be a paradise.

Ask yourself why it isn't.

Prelude: You discovered socialism at college. You arrived on a scholarship, and the discovery of people who were actually trying to deal with what was wrong with the world seized you. You had brains and energy — to survive your back-streets childhood you needed them — and you had found something you could believe in at last. You joined the campus group, and for the first time, you had real friends, people who shared your passion. The great career you were going to have fell by the wayside as you worked, as you believed, for the future of the world.

You linked up with the movement in the real world, volunteered for duties and won positions. But along the way, nearly all your supposed friends and comrades dropped out. You didn't understand. You had a day job, you got tired just like they did. You didn't understand why they were giving up, but you kept working. You were going to make a difference.

Then the rally against Third-World debt went bad. It was arranged as a peaceful march with speeches, but things got out of hand. The crux was that it was you up there on that podium trying to calm things down, but you had all the effect of a drop of water on a volcano. Suddenly it was like you were back in your old neighborhood, watching the kids killing each other for no reason. In the end, you were screaming at them, what was wrong? What did they want? And no one heard a word. Except for her.

She looked just like anyone else who was there that day, those who had escaped the cops. You figured you would probably be picked up the moment you went back to your digs, so you wandered around with her all night. She said she could see you really believed in the cause, and you realized you still did, in spite of everything. If only you could understand why people acted the way they did, what made them do stupid, short-sighted and selfish things, then maybe you actually could make a difference.

She said, "Let's start with the police."

Concept: You believed in the potential of humanity. Now you find yourself in a supernatural world where humans seem to be puppets at best. The demon granted you extraordinary insight, but instead of enabling you to act as you dreamed, you find yourself with too much information, unable to choose between sides and painfully aware of all possible consequences. You are an idealist teetering on the brink.

Roleplaying Hints: When faced with a decision based on your insight, you vacillate. You act with relief when something does appear clean cut, but doubts torment you afterward. You are efficient, practical and a good organizer, although you have almost forgotten this side of your abilities, and you still attempt to help and protect the people who need it. This may even extend to action against your demon and her infernal cohorts.

Equipment: cell phone, boxes of fliers and pamphlets

Nature: Architect

Demeanor: Visionary

Concept: Embittered Activist

Attributes: Strength 2, Dexterity 2, Stamina 3, Charisma 2, Manipulation 2, Appearance 2, Perception 3, Intelligence 4 (Theorist), Wits 2

Abilities: Academics 2, Alertness 2, Brawl 2, Computer 1, Dodge 1, Empathy 1, Intuition 2, Investigation 2, Law 1, Melee 2, Politics 3, Science 2, Security 1, Stealth 1, Streetwise 2

Backgrounds: Allies 2, Attentive Master 2, Resources 1

Virtues: Conscience 2, Conviction 2, Courage 2

Willpower: 7

Faith Potential: 3

Infernal Gifts: Empathy +1, Intuition +2, Willpower +2



NEGLECTED PARENT

*I gave them the best years of my life,
and this is how they repay me?*

Prelude: You believe in family. A happy family is as much a community of God as any church. Your husband understood that before he passed away, and although his death is still an almost physical pain to you, you sometimes think it was a blessing. He never discovered the true depth of selfishness of those ungrateful whelps you call your children.

What went wrong? You did your best, but here you are, trapped by failing health in an uncaring institution, and your offspring are too caught up in their own lives to care. It makes your blood boil like it has not done in 30 years.

The card was the last straw. It was your birthday, and all you got was a joint birthday card with a cheap gilt angel on the front that must have cost the three of them a buck each at most. You weren't going to take it! That's what you told the nurse, when she found you trying to balance on your wasted legs in your room. You had failed in your duty to raise God-fearing Christians, but it might not be too late. At the very least, you could get them to take some notice of you.

The nurse understood. You weren't sure you'd seen her before, but she didn't treat you like some simpleton. She saw that your flesh was weak, but your spirit was strong. She showed you that a lifetime of faith was justified and that the Angels of the Lord understood your anger. It felt so good.

All three of them visited the weekend after your birthday, babbling about some gift they'd sent you. It was their last sin, that they dared to lie to their own mother. The Angel of the Lord gave you the strength to stand before them and strike them down with your fists. They knew fear then; they learned respect.

Everybody treats you differently at the home now. Even though you are back in your bed, all the nurses know you're

not to be messed with. But you haven't seen the other nurse since your children came. You don't want to ask about her, because you know she is really an Angel of the Lord, but you think about her a lot. She seems to grow in your mind, her words take on depth they did not have before. You think about your angel and hope she returns to you soon.

Concept: When youth, strength and love are all gone, faith remains. God is in Heaven, and He watches over His children. You are His witness.

Roleplaying Hints: Don't take anything from anybody; after all, who's to say where your newfound strength ends? Tell your story to those who will respond and use them to provide what you need, including mobility and contact with the outside world. Do everything you can to find out more about your angel, and when all else fails, call your children and see if they dare refuse you.

Equipment: cane, pocket watch, library card

Nature: Director

Demeanor: Curmudgeon

Concept: Neglected Parent

Attributes: Strength 3, Dexterity 3, Stamina 3, Charisma 4 (Charmer), Manipulation 5 (Pulls at heartstrings), Appearance 2, Perception 4 (Eagle-Eyed), Intelligence 4 (Sharp Mind), Wits 4 (Quick Thinker)

Abilities: Academics 3, Alertness 2, Crafts 1, Drive 1, Etiquette 2, Intimidation 2, Intuition 1, Law 2, Medicine 2, Politics 1, Religion 3, Subterfuge 2

Backgrounds: Contacts 2, Resources 3

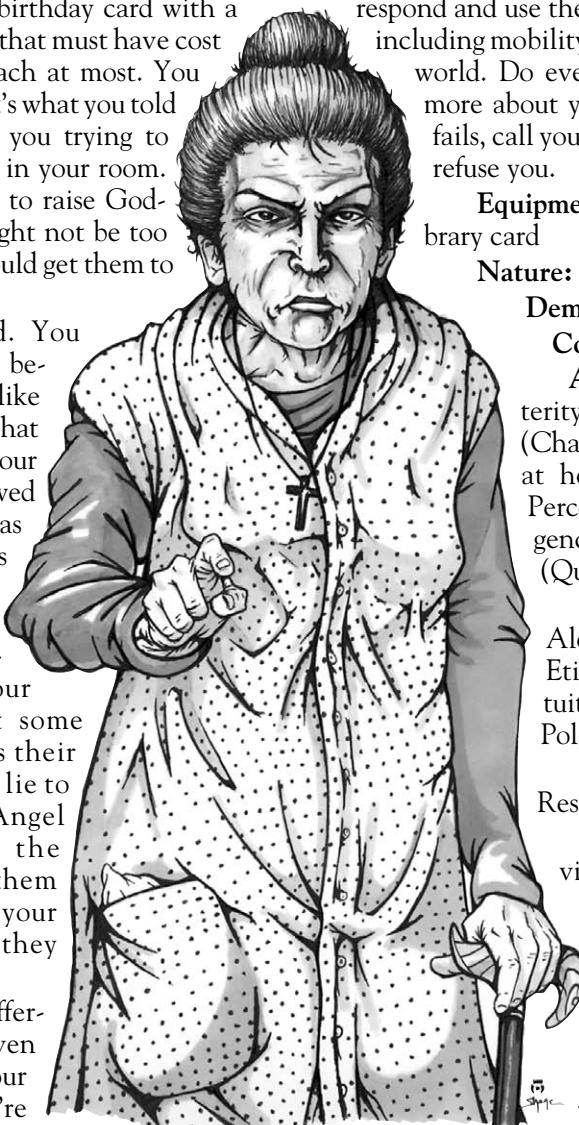
Virtues: Conscience ?, Conviction ?, Courage ?

Willpower: 6

Faith Potential: 3

Infernal Gifts:

Strength +2, Dexterity +1, Charisma +2, Manipulation +2, Perception +1, Intelligence +1, Wits +1



INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALIST

*Try me.
You'd be surprised at what I'll believe in.*

Prelude: You were the kid at the back of the class with the look that said you weren't fooled. You knew there was more going on than they told you. Too much of a rebel to win through to the top of your profession as a fearless investigator and writer of exposés, you nonetheless had a name. You reveled in probing the corrupt underbelly of society for a long time, but you eventually grew tired.

When you were working, you were searching for the truth. You had always felt a strange certainty that underneath all the spin and hype lay a deeper meaning. You believed it all made sense, and everything from the philosophy you read to the crimes you uncovered was part of your search. Every day was another tiny disappointment, of course, but it was the downtown murders that finally broke you.

It's all on record. You were doing a feature on the life of street kids, and you found the body parts in the bin. You were involved in the investigation of the city's worst serial killer and yes, it was exciting. That is, of course, until they caught the guy and he admitted that he'd had no motive and followed no pattern. He hadn't even suffered any underlying trauma. He was just some crack head who'd cut bits off himself if he was bored and no one else was around to cut on. The only reason the killings went on for so long was that no one who knew about him actually cared. So you gave your testimony and woke up in middle of the night realizing there was no deeper meaning. One day you would die, and that would be it.

It's ironic in hindsight, because that's how you met Death. (That's what you call him, anyway.) Like anyone else in your position, you started work on a true crime book, and there was this forensic guy you really got on with. You'd meet and talk about cases and talk philosophy, and you ended up drinking together

in a cemetery one night where you bet he couldn't convince you of a single thing he claimed — like that death wasn't the end.

So now you've sold your soul for knowledge of the true state of the world and the ability to see the spirits of the dead. To ask them what really happened. Actually, you're feeling pretty damn good.

Concept: Cool and prepared, able to look the world in the eye and not blink. Well, you can't drop the act now! But so much is going on that no one has any idea of — you certainly didn't — and the universe has vistas wilder and more beautiful than you ever dared dream. If only you could let people know!

Roleplaying Hints: Stay alert, collect information, get your proof. Keep ready for action at all times. Then go off the rails, laughing and weeping, because a mother's ghost watches over her children.

Equipment: pocket tape recorder, cell phone, press credentials

Nature: Visionary

Demeanor: Rebel

Concept: Investigative Journalist

Attributes: Strength 2, Dexterity 2, Stamina 2, Charisma 2, Manipulation 4 (Fast-talker), Appearance 1, Perception 4 (Nosy), Intelligence 3, Wits 3

Abilities: Academics 1, Alertness 2, Brawl 2, Dodge 1, Drive 2, Expression 3, Firearms 1, Intuition 1, Investigation 2, Law 1, Research 1, Security 1, Stealth 3, Streetwise 2

Backgrounds: Contacts 3, Resources 2

Virtues: Conscience 1, Conviction 2, Courage 3

Willpower: 6

Faith Potential: 2

Infernal Gifts: Speak with the Dead (Lore of the Spirit •)

